BOOK GIRL

and the Famished Spirit

MIZUKI NOMURA

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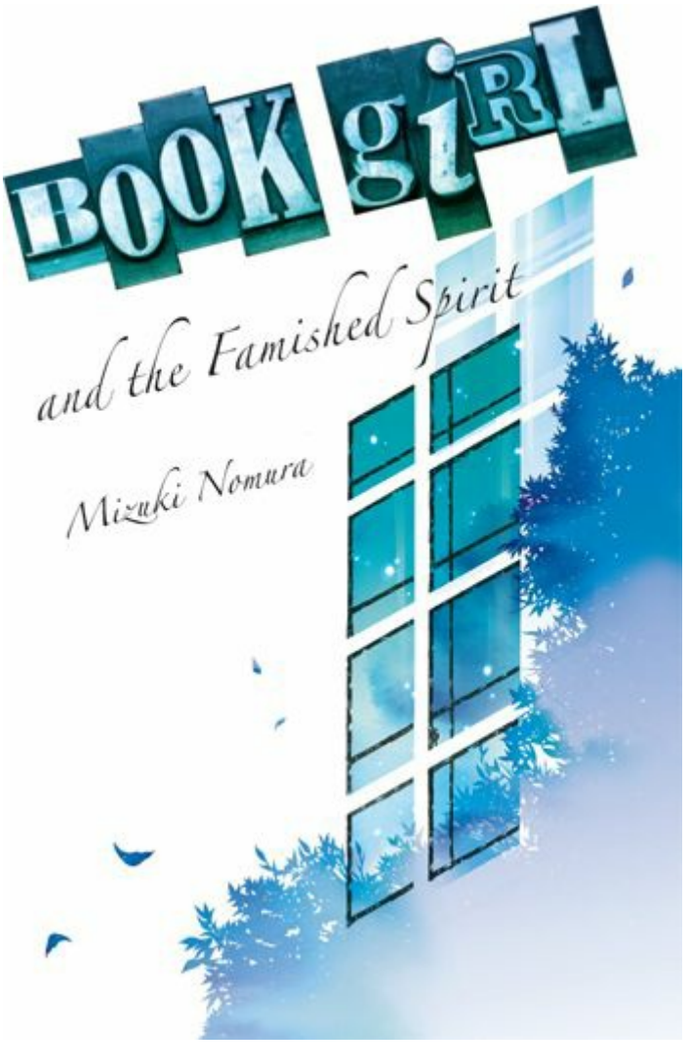
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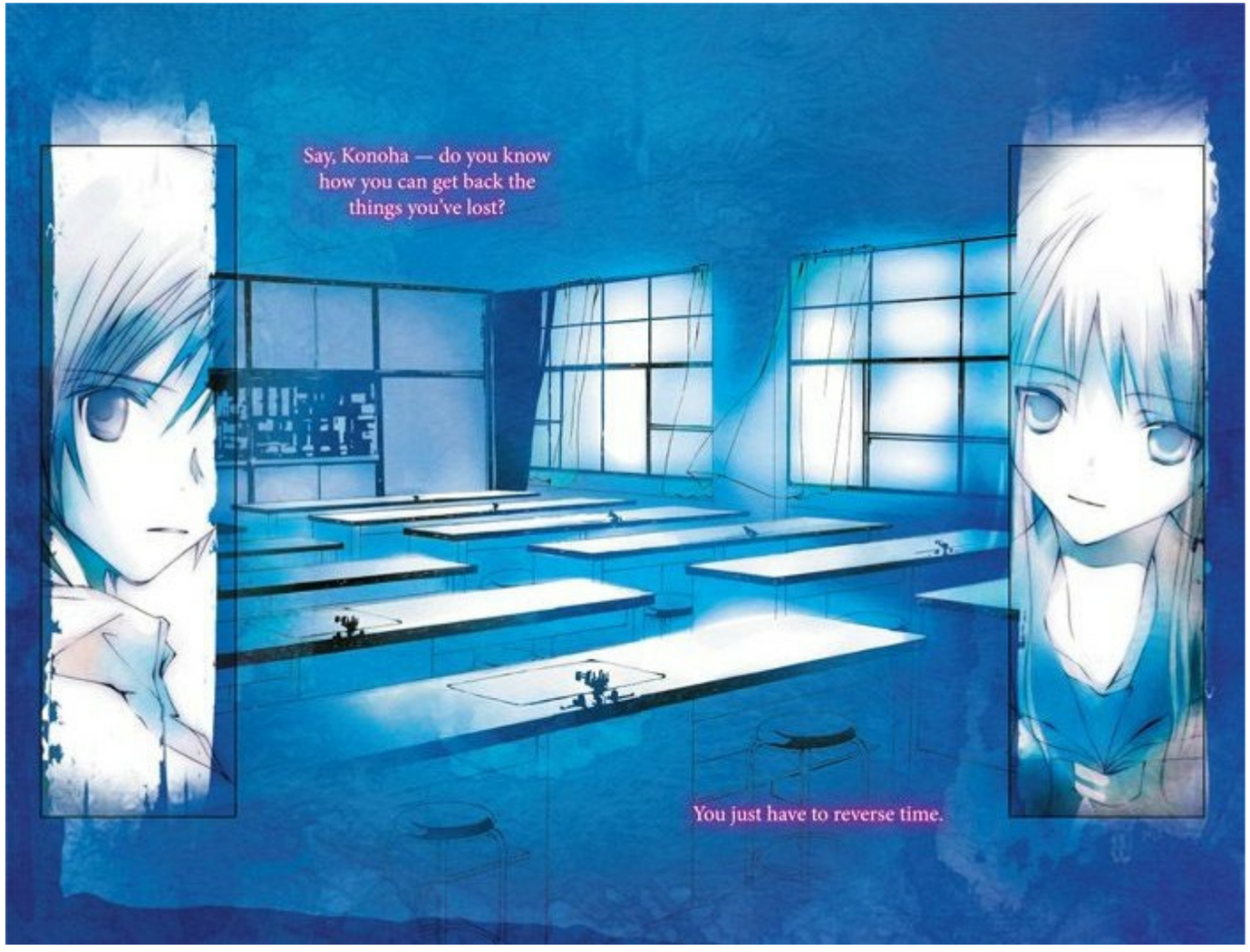
URK KOFF KOFF UR-URRK
SO. HOT.
SCRIBBLE SCRIBBLE SCRIBBLE


Say, Konoha — do you know how you can get back the things you've lost?
You just have to reverse time.

Maki Himekura
"YOU KNOW, IT COULD BE A REAL GHOST."
Nanase Kotobuki
"WHAT A JERK. YOU THINK ACTING LIKE THE PERFECT STUDENT IMPRESSES ME?"
Ryuto Sakurai
"I LOVE HAVING THRILLS LIKE THAT IN MY LIFE. IT ONLY MAKES ME FIGHT HARDER."
Hotaru Amemiya
"I THINK . . . YOU MUST HAVE MET MY GHOST."

"My motto is *supposed* to be 'A wise man counts no danger' . . ."
KONOHA INOUE
"Do you want some?"
TOHKO AMANO, THE "BOOK GIRL"

He would kill her.

His body trembled with a tempest of madness as he made the decision.

Yes. Kill her. Do it.

So that time would never flow back on its original path. So that she would be forever bound in his world.

Embrace her corpse, drink her blood, devour her flesh, lay your head on her bones, and rest in the same casket. Her eyes, her nose, her lips, her skin, her flesh, her blood, her bones—all of it belonged to him.

As each of his fingers bit into her throat—white as snow and cold as an icicle—he whispered hoarsely.

“Good-bye, Kayano, my betrayer.”

Prologue – Memories for an Introduction—I Used to Be a Shut-In

This is a perfect misanthrope's heaven.

So said a certain gentleman who secluded himself in the countryside. During the second half of my third year in middle school, I secluded myself in my bedroom.

I kept the curtains shut through the day and drew the covers over my head, praying that the sun wouldn't rise, that tomorrow would never come, while I dug my nails into the sheets and buried my face in the pillow, blubbering.

There were plenty of middle school boys in Japan, so why had this happened to *me*?

What had *I* done?

I wasn't actually a misanthrope. It was just that the first novel I ever wrote happened to be chosen for a new author's prize; I happened to be the youngest winner ever; and I happened to choose Miu Inoue as my pen name, which made me sound like a girl.

But when my book was published, it had to go and become a best seller, and there had to be a big stir about "the brilliant, mysterious young girl" who wrote it… and in exchange, I lost something important to me.

I would never again be able to see the special girl I had liked ever since I was little, but that didn't stop people from applauding the fourteen-year-old girl genius or conjecturing about who Miu really was, and the publishers hounded me for my next book almost every single day.

Why did I have to keep writing novels when something so awful had happened to Miu?

Just leave me alone. I'm not a brilliant author, and I'm not a stuck-up girl from a good family who could actually pull off the whole white parasol look. I'm never going to write a novel again!

Cold sweat coated my body. The tips of my fingers ached. My chest tightened as if it were being twisted in a vice. I couldn't breathe. I closed the door to my room, squeezed my eyes shut tight, covered my ears, blocked out all information, and tried to pretend that *none of it had happened.*

Everything happening outside my door was a dream. Only this side of the door was real, and the other side was nothing but lies. Please, don't let anyone open the door. Don't come in here. If the door opens, that world of lies will become reality. It will crash over me like a tsunami and swallow me up and I'll drown.

I bit down on my blanket, damp and smelling of sweat, until my gums bled, and with all of my heart, I wished I could go back in time and do it all over again.

Just a few months, that's all. If I could just go back…

I would never write that novel. I would never apply to the new author competition.

I could just be an ordinary middle school student at Miu's side, watching her smile, listening to her stories like rays of sunlight in a forest, intoxicated by the vibrant abundance of words she wrote, and my heart would be satisfied with that, not afraid of the world or the people in it, living my life in peace and happiness.

I want to go back.

I want to do it over.

Please, God. Please put me back the way I was before I wrote that novel.

But no matter how earnestly the middle school boy prayed in his dark bedroom, of course a convenient request like that would never be granted.

At the end of a long, long winter, I hobbled out of bed, took the exams, and entered high school.

And in the summer of my second year of high school—

I'm writing treats for the "book girl" in the book club with only two members.

Chapter 1 – Pay Attention to What You Eat

With slender fingers, Tohko tore a corner off the page and placed it in her mouth, then gave a quick smile.

“Yummm.”

Then she took another bite, and then another…

With great care, she tore off a bit of the lined paper, densely covered in the writing of a mechanical pencil, and brought it to her lips. She chewed it with soft, crinkling noises and swallowed neatly.

“That was really brisk… and sweet,” she murmured rapturously, her small face lolling forward. But then her mouth pulled into a grimace, and confusion filled her round, black eyes as her face slowly tensed. Sweat beaded up on her forehead, and the very moment the last scrap had fearfully passed her lips, Tohko leaped up from her metal folding chair.

“TOO HOOOOOT!!”

Her long, thin braids bounced in the air like black cats’ tails, fat tears rolled from her eyes, and she clung to the back of the chair as she reproachfully exclaimed, “Th-that was *so spicy.* My tongue feels like it’s being torn out. My eyeballs are going to shoot flames. My nose is going to drip all over my face. That story had way too much spice in it, Konoha!”

I closed my notebook and put my pencil away while I serenely replied, “Maybe your prompts didn’t go together so well. I get an ‘apple orchard’ and ‘flower swing,’ but then a ‘fully automatic washing machine’? That definitely clashes.”

Tohko preferred improv stories, which are stories constructed from three prompts, for her snacks.

Whenever I went to the club room after school, Tohko would already be waiting for me with a silver stopwatch in hand.

“Okay, Konoha, today’s topics are ‘a Crowsmas party,’ ‘Tokyo Dome,’ and ‘a Virgo boy.’ Make it *super*sugary, okay? You have exactly fifty minutes. And go!”

Her face beaming, not a speck of worry to be seen, she punched the stopwatch.

Afterward, Tohko would tear the story I had written into little pieces and bring them to her lips. Then she began correcting everything, chewing and gobbling the whole time.

“*Nom-nom*… The middle seems a little flavorless. Maybe you should try using shorter sentences and see if the tempo picks up. Oh! The last scene is so squishy and delicious—it tastes like mango pudding.”

This girl is one grade ahead of me, a third-year goblin who eats stories.

She’ll crunch her way through the written word with relish, whether it’s handwritten or printed in a book, just like you and I eat bread or drink water. Then she’ll happily unleash her vast knowledge about what she’s eaten.

Though, if I called her a “goblin,” she would probably pout and argue. “Don’t call me a goblin! I’m just an average book girl, who loves all the books of the world so intensely that she devours them.”

Her long, thin braids that trail to her waist; her clear, intelligent black eyes; her ivory skin; her slender, curveless figure—judging strictly by surface features, Tohko could have been a book girl from an older, better age: a refined young lady perfectly complemented by violets.

But it just so happened that on the inside, she was a troublesome club president—a talkative glutton, ravenously inquisitive, and eager to stick her nose into everything.

“*Snff*… my tongue is still tingling. I was expecting a bittersweet love story that would make my heart ache. But you wrote a story where a boy gets into an automated washing machine and flies to this apple orchard at the ends of the earth, and then every time he swings on the flower swing, apples with human faces on them start screaming and drop to the ground.

“Blech! I gobbled it up thinking it would taste like apple pie and tart cream, but instead of apples, it was filled with bright red Szechuan noodles, and instead of cinnamon sprinkled on top, it tasted like it was covered with chili powderrrr!”

The impact of the decapitated-head apples had been pretty strong apparently since her nose was still running and she was crying.

“All I did was write what you told me to. Don’t complain to me.”

“You’re so coldhearted, Konoha! You might look like Little Lord Fauntleroy, but inside you’re Miss Minchin from *A Little Princess*!”

“What kind of comparison is that? I don’t have blond hair or big eyes, and I don’t wear frilly shirts like that, either.”

Tohko sighed. “Maybe I’ll have some Aiken short stories to get rid of that awful taste. ‘A Necklace of Raindrops’ would be good or ‘There’s Some Sky in This Pie’ or maybe ‘The Three Travelers’! That would be so, so, sooo yummy!”

She tucked her legs under her on the folding chair and rocked it back and forth, hugging the backrest. *What are you,* I thought, *some preschooler throwing a tantrum in a store because you want a toy?*

Aghast, I offered, “ ‘The Three Travelers’ was in my literature book. That’s the one about the three attendants at a train station in the desert who take a break, and each one goes on a journey, right?”

That made Tohko’s face light up. She started talking animatedly.

“That’s right. Joan Aiken was a British children’s author who was born in 1924. Her series *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* is such a roller coaster and as charming and sharp as the ginger cookies the mother in the story bakes for the children. I recommend it, but her short stories are juicy and delicious, too! ‘The Three Travelers’ is like fresh fruit. Oranges that burst with golden juice, refreshing citron, muscats like jewels. It’s like popping them against your tongue as the cool fruit juice spills into your mouth!”

Her long eyelashes drooped as her eyes closed, and she craned her neck back, murmuring in ecstasy. When she talked about food, Tohko sounded truly happy.

Our club room was located in the western corner of the school’s third floor. It

had once been a storage room, and mounds of old books were stacked along the walls. In what small space remained stood an old oak table with a pocked surface.

Sunlight poured in from the west at sunset. I would sit at the wobbly table in the dusty room, which was dyed the rich color of honey, and fill sheets of paper with my mechanical pencil.

Meanwhile, Tohko propped her feet up on her folding chair, her knees pulled up to her chest—exhibiting little concern for manners—and turned the pages of a book with a look of pure ecstasy on her face. She would steal a glance in my direction from time to time to check on the progress of her snack, then grin happily and go back to reading.

It was just the two of us in the book club, and I had been writing Tohko's snacks for more than a year.

Tohko sighed. "Now I just want to eat Aiken even worse. Oh, I know!"

Tohko's eyes snapped open, emerging from the fantasy she'd been constructing, and she leaned forward with a grin.

"Maybe there's a syrupy letter waiting for us in the mailbox in the schoolyard."

She was talking about the mailbox she had set up without permission, which read "We will grant you your love. Interested parties, please send us a letter. By, the Book Club." It had been nothing but trouble.

Tohko couldn't control herself when it came to her favorite food—handwritten, one-of-a-kind stories, preferably sugary love stories. In order to get a taste, she offered to grant the love of whoever came to her for help and required a report detailing their pure feelings as compensation. She was the kind of person for whom no effort was too great in the pursuit of good food.

I just wished she would stop getting me involved in everything, too.

"I'm not ghostwriting any more love letters, got that?" My warning was firm, but she wasn't paying any attention.

"Sure thing."

She slid out of the folding chair giving her noncommittal reply, and went off to

check the mailbox with a cheerful stride.

Geez…

Left alone in the room, I let out a sigh.

The wind blew in through an open window, fluttering the paper on top of the oak table.

Summer had been cooler this year than last and much easier to get through. I was grateful for that since the club room had no air-conditioning. Hopefully Tohko wouldn't stick her nose into any other messes, drag me along, and make it a summer of sweat and toil.

I gazed at the white clouds floating by beyond the curtains, billowing and swelling with the wind, until Tohko returned, her shoulders thrown back.

"This is so mean! Read this, Konoha!" she exploded, scattering the papers in her hand across the tea-colored table.

Tohko had returned bearing small strips of paper ripped from a college-ruled notebook. They were all different shapes and the edges were rough. Lines of penciled writing were scribbled across them.

hate you help a ghost I'm scared it hurts go away

I looked at the wobbly letters skipping across the roughly torn bits of paper, and my eyes widened. I gasped.

There were some pieces of paper with only strings of numbers on them.

4-5

25-27-3-28-4-5-10-28-25-4-28-2-5-12-21

13-24-5-28-17-3-28-25

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4

"I wonder what these numbers mean," Tohko said with a serious look, scrunching up her face. "Four symbolizes death, so obviously '4-5' means 4 (death), 5 (finds you). Someone has issued us a challenge."

I was left momentarily agape at her reasoning process. Then I recovered.

“Hold on. Don’t you think you’re making some leaps there? Couldn’t it just be a joke instead of something all overblown like a challenge? And stop saying ‘us.’ ”

“What are you saying, Konoha? Even if it is just a joke, we can’t overlook the villains who would dump something this unappetizing—I mean, this cowardly and uninspired—into my precious snack box—er, the book club’s sacred mailbox! This is a battle for the continued existence of the book club. Are you going to put up with being picked on just because there’s only two of us? We have to teach them that the book club is poor in numbers but rich in spirit!”

“When you say battle… are you planning on fighting them?”

“Yes, I am. And if it comes to that, I’ll beat the drums of war and trumpet their defeat.”

Uh-oh. She was getting carried away again, like always. I knew the fantasy was gaining steam in Tohko’s mind now. When they get like this, book girls are beyond help.

“My midterms are coming up soon, so I’ll just head home.”

I quickly gathered up my things and started to leave, but Tohko clamped both hands around my arm like a vice.

“No way. We’re staking out the school yard from now on. This is a direct order from your president, Konoha.”

Tohko’s chest pressed against my arm. She was so flat it was sad, and that made me wonder if she was really in her final year of high school. It was in that moment that she won my pity, and I stopped myself from shaking off her grip. That was the site of my defeat.

I ended up spending the precious few days left before the midterms with Tohko in the school yard.

And then…

“Hey! They put another one in there!”

It was seven in the morning. The school yard was soaked from the previous night’s rain.

Peeking out beside an old tree in one corner, half-buried in the grass, was the goblin mailbox—strike that, the love advice mailbox.

Tohko groaned. “Urgggh. We’re here an hour early and everything. And we stayed all the way to six o’clock yesterday.”

“Maybe they’re dropping them off at night.”

I thought the creepy note would be a onetime thing, but surprisingly they came every day after that.

They said more or less the same thing: *hate you, help, a ghost.* Words like that appeared frequently. And the strings of incomprehensible numbers…

“These numbers show up a lot: 25, 28, 20, 5, 4, 27, 10, 28, 4, 21, 21, 20, 28, 24, 21, 17, 12, 21, 4. I wonder what they mean?”

Tohko furrowed her brow intently and soberly replied, “This one means 25 (to find you), 28 (to eat you), 20 (I went), 5 (found you), 4 (for), 27 (to send you), 10 (then), 28 (to eat you), 4 (force), 21 (to let me win), 21 (again), 20 (plenty), 28 (I’ll eat you), 24 (and then force you), 21 (to let me win), 17 (won’t send you), 12 (not both of you), 21 (to let me win), 4 (forever). See?”

“I don’t get it.”

“You need to work on your reading comprehension a bit more, Konoha. In essence, it’s saying, ‘I’m going to send you these notes and then find you and eat you so I can win forever!’ ”

“Now I get it even less. You sure you’re reading it right?”

“What’s this? You doubt your president? I’m a book girl! I’ve read every word of Christie and Queen and Jiro Akutagawa.”

I wasn’t sure that Jiro Akutagawa was so serious… But no, I didn’t care.

“Then hurry up and deduce who committed the crime. Midterms are next week, you know. I want to go home and study.”

“Konoha, there are more important things to learn while you’re still in school than mathematical formulas and chemical symbols.”

“That’s sophistry.”

The sight of us hunkered down in the school yard at the crack of dawn, our heads bent together in whispered discussion, was utterly absurd and stupid.

“No! Absolutely not!”

It was lunchtime, and I was hurrying Tohko along despite her resistance. We were paying a visit to the school’s music hall. The luxurious building, which was made up of a large auditorium that could seat a thousand people and several smaller halls, belonged to the school orchestra. The orchestra had lots of members and had even won competitions, and it was as different from the book club—which met in a storage room and was barely active—as high-end Matsusaka beef was from beef jerky.

The president of the school orchestra was the conductor, a girl named Maki Himekura, who smiled in amusement as she listened to our story.

“Wow, is that what happened? And just how long have you been keeping watch in the morning and after school? You certainly are dedicated.”

There were windows set in the building’s domed roof, and the brilliant summer sunlight pouring through them made the room look like a cathedral. There were several sketches and watercolors hanging on the walls, and in the center of the studio was a canvas propped on an easel.

Maki sat down, crossing her legs grandly, still holding her paintbrush. Her deeply chiseled features, her long hair that spread like golden waves in the light, her figure that curved exactly where it was supposed to—unlike Tohko’s—all were commanding in a way that was unlike most Japanese people. Apparently her mother had been from another country, and Maki’s heritage was mixed.

She had actually wanted to join the art club, so she spent most of her breaks and afternoons drawing alone in a workroom inside the music building. She was the school director’s granddaughter—which was why she got such special treatment—and since she had contacts and connections everywhere, she was a font of information.

“You should have come to me right away. I would have looked into it. Don’t be such a stranger, Tohko.”

When Maki’s mocking gaze fell upon her, Tohko bit her lip ruefully.

Before she could say anything, I smiled politely at Maki with my best good-guy face for public consumption. “We knew we could count on you, Maki.”

Tohko glared at me disapprovingly. I’m sure she thought I was implying I couldn’t count on her. On the other hand, the edges of Maki’s smile softened slightly.

“Well, that’s because I’m an indispensable source of information with all those alumni and relatives I have.”

“Then if you could—”

I leaned forward, but Maki countered in a syrupy tone, “But I have one condition before I’ll look into who’s leaving you these notes. I presume that you know what it is, Tohko?”

Tohko flushed bright red at that, all the way to her ears. She tossed her long braids and shouted, “You want me to pose nude for you, right? I refuse!”

Well, Maki *had* said that she’d had her eye on Tohko ever since they started school here, but I thought she would be much better off looking in a mirror and drawing herself naked rather than fighting so hard to render Tohko’s flat chest. I suppose people really do covet what they lack themselves.

Tohko balled her hands up fiercely, enraged.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to come see her. All she ever does is act like a horny boss, drunkenly harassing me at a party and trying to get me to take my clothes off. I’m a lovely and innocent book girl. I’m very modest, unlike Maki. I am a bashful white lily. Just because we’re both girls doesn’t mean I’m just going to take my clothes off for her.”

Does a white lily sit with her feet pulled up on her folding chair, or straddle it and rock it back and forth, or munch on books in front of people?

“I see. Then I can’t help you. Too bad,” Maki replied heartlessly.

I became intently self-effacing. “Uh, maybe we can work something out?”

“Konoha! Don’t bow to her! You have a charming upperclassman you can rely on right here!”

Tohko grabbed my arm and started walking, the *Now let’s go!* unspoken.

Ugh, are we doing another stakeout? Midterms are next week.

“Sorry to bother you,” Tohko declared petulantly as she reached the door.

Maki smiled mischievously and said, “You know, it could be a real ghost writing these mysterious notes. There’s a ghost who wanders the school grounds every night, writing down numbers. That’s what I’ve heard from the alumni.”

“You can’t believe what she told us, Konoha. Ghosts don’t actually exist.”

After classes were over—well actually, at night—stars winked in the sky overhead.

“Yeah, okay. Can I go home now, Tohko? It’s past nine.”

“No, we’re not budging one step tonight until the perpetrators show themselves.”

Tohko’s eyes were fixed on the mailbox as she crouched low over the pavement in the shadow of the school building.

“We’re going to catch them and prove to Maki that there’s no such thing as ghosts.”

Maki had told us that more than ten years ago there had been stories of a ghost who wrote numbers on the wall of the biology lab or on desks in the geography room.

“They were written in an oil-based ink, so they got washed off and you can’t see them anymore,” she said. “But this is a famous ghost story they’ve told at our school for a long time. Didn’t your alums ever tell you? Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot, the book club doesn’t have any.”

Tohko loved the book club, and that comment seemed to have injured her pride.

“We’re keeping watch all night, Konoha!” she proclaimed as soon as we’d left the music hall.

It terrified me, but she really did seem energized to stake the place out until morning.

“There are goblins who eat stories, so why can’t there be ghosts? Let’s just

assume it was a ghost and get out of here.”

I wanted to go home as soon as I possibly could, but when I gave this hint as to how put out I was, Tohko glared at me with incredible ferocity.

“I am *not* a goblin! I’m an ordinary book girl who just eats her books. Even if I granted you that I’m a goblin—which I’m *not*—I don’t want to be lumped in with things like ghosts. It’s so cheap when it turns out it was all a dream or because of a ghost. It’s just wrong. I don’t accept ghosts.”

Did Tohko have something against ghosts? I suddenly remembered how she had stressed that if I ever ran into a ghost, I had to be sure to sprinkle salt around.

The way things were going, it didn’t look like I’d be able to go home anytime soon. My poor exams…

My mother thought I was studying at a friend’s house. Once I’d finished the after-school cleanup, I’d called her from a public phone on campus and explained, “I’m going to go study for the exams at a classmate’s house. What? His name? A guy named Akutagawa. So I might be late getting home.”

“So you made a friend you’re that close with? I’m glad.”

She’d been so happy.

Ever since starting high school, I had never hung out with friends, so she had probably been worried about me. My chest ached with guilt. Plus, I’d lied about studying when what I was actually doing was playing detective with my goblin club president.

I’m sorry, Mom. In an effort to study at least a little bit, I opened my math workbook and started working on problems by the light of the moon and streetlamps.

“You’re so serious, Konoha.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking your college exams this year?”

“I learn very well in class. I’ll be fine,” she declared haughtily, and bringing her small face close to mine, she peered at my workbook.

Her long braids spilled over her thin shoulders, and the faint scent of violets

tickled my nose.

“If you have any questions, you just ask me.”

She encouraged me in the kindly tone of a volunteer tutor, lifting her chin slightly, her eyes shining sweetly. But as soon as she got a look at the formulas I had written down in the book, she choked.

“… Geez, you’re working on problems this hard? Are you in the advanced class or something, Konoha? Are you secretly trying to get into Tokyo University?”

“We don’t have advanced classes at our school. Besides, this is the easy stuff. You learned all this last year, didn’t you?”

“Um… did I? Math and machines and I don’t really see eye to eye.”

Tohko looked away abruptly and fidgeted. A thought suddenly occurred to me.

“Hey, now that you mention it… Can you eat numbers?”

“Technically I *can*… But I look at words first and feel them in my heart, and then I eat them. Numbers are just numbers, though. If I can’t get any meaning out of them, even if I put them in my mouth and chew, they’ll only taste like uncooked macaroni.”

I see…

Tohko had told me that she could eat the bread or rice that we eat, but it didn’t taste like anything. It must be the same thing.

“What about the alphabet?”

“Same thing. If I don’t understand the meaning, it’s just uncooked alphabet macaroni,” she whispered sadly. Then a small smile spread over her lips, as if a violet was blooming. “But of course, I want to try reading stories in foreign languages in the original. It’s so sad that amazing stories that set my heart fluttering are just a string of letters to me. So I study English really hard. That and French, Italian, German, and Chinese.

“It’s frustrating to read things line by line while I look things up, but it makes me treat each word with care and makes them meaningful, and when I find a word glittering amidst the others, it gives me such a thrill. The words I have to hunt out like that taste absolutely divine when they pop in my mouth,” she said

rapturously, her voice soft and lilting.

The clear moonlight shone on Tohko's pale face.

She looked so mystical and at least three times prettier than usual, so I decided it might be all right to go along with her whims every once in a while.

"If you worked that hard at math and figured the problems out all the way, maybe they would have a flavor all their own."

"Er, that… seems unlikely."

Seeing her blush and mumble, I almost burst out laughing.

"Come on, there must be subjects you're bad at, too."

"That's true. I guess sometimes I get a little turned around by classics class."

"That's one of my best subjects. I'll help you! Quick, get your book out. What's the test going to be on?"

She was shaking my arm, hurrying me on gleefully, when suddenly we heard the school bell ring.

"Eek!"

Startled, Tohko screamed. I snapped my head up.

There was no reason for the bell to ring after school had let out, but we heard it clearly.

I glanced at my watch and saw it was approaching ten o'clock.

"It's still too early for the witching hour."

"Don't say that kind of thing, Konoha! Eek!"

Tohko screamed again.

The lights had turned on in all of the windows of the school building and rapidly began winking out.

On top of that, there was a sharp noise, as though two hands were slapping together—*clap! clap!*—and on top of all *that*, we heard the sound of a girl's sobs mingling into it.

"Open it… Put it inside…"

I caught the sound of a reedy voice, and all of my hair stood on end.

Goose bumps prickled my skin and my senses sharpened. My neck and limbs tensed, and my body became cold as ice, though the air was clammy, and felt like it had turned to lead.

“It really was a ghost after all, Tohko.”

“N-no! No! We’re just hearing things. And those lights are only doing that because the fluorescent bulbs are getting old. They start flickering when they’re about to burn out, right?”

“Not like that, just snapping off all at once.”

The lights were still flickering, which left my head spinning, and the slapping noise continued to cut into my ears.

More than any of that, though, the undiluted anguish of the girl’s weeping sent us hurtling into a pit of terror.

“Gh-ghosts aren’t r-r-real. They aren’t,” Tohko said, her lips trembling. She had balled up my sleeve in her tenacious grip.

“Yeah, ghosts aren’t—”

Just then a human figure rose into view in the school yard.

Tohko sucked in her breath.

That girl…

Appearing out of the shadows, the girl carried a black schoolbag in one hand and wore a school uniform. But it was not the modern, cropped sailor-style shirt and pleated skirt like the one Tohko wore.

Her uniform was a more dowdy dress in the sailor style—I’d seen it in old pictures that hung in the school building. *It was the old uniform from before they’d changed styles!* And even though it was summer, she wore a winter uniform!

She walked up to the mailbox with delicate, airy steps and then plopped down on the ground.

After that, she took a notebook and writing implement out of her bag, wrote

something down in the notebook, then tore the page up and started slipping it into the mailbox.

At some point the flickering had abated and the slapping noise had died away.

Silence reigned; even the wind was inaudible.

But she was still there. Bathed in silver moonlight, detached and silent as she continued to write in her notebook and rip the pages into little shreds, the sight of her was so unusual that I couldn't look away.

Her arms were much too thin and made her look like a lifeless mannequin. But no—it wasn't just her arms. Her thin hips, frail shoulders, tiny back, her translucent chestnut hair, plus the sickly white nape of her neck floating up out of the darkness… Every part of her was thin, unnatural, pale. She simply didn't look like someone still drawing breath.

A bitter lump slipped down my throat. My mouth felt dry, and my hands were slick with sweat.

What in the world was she doing over there? Was she the one leaving us notes?

"Er… ghosts aren't real."

Still clinging to my shirt, Tohko started walking toward the girl. I was terrified.

"Why are you taking me with you?!"

"You're a member of the book club, too. Go and ask that girl what she's doing."

"Why me?!"

"That's an order."

When we started fighting, the girl turned around.

Tohko stopped in her tracks with a jolt. My breath caught, too.

The girl's face was as fair as a Western doll's, but her skin was pale as a will-o'-the-wisp and her expression was as desolate as a cavern, offering no hint of emotion.

"Wh-who are you? What are you doing?"

Only then did consciousness flicker to life in her empty eyes.

I watched with amazement as a rosy color flashed across her cheeks and a vibrant, almost arrogant smile pulled at her lips.

What is *this girl?*

She answered in a haughty, sweet voice. “I am Kayano Kujo. What I do and where I choose to do it is my business. I’ll do whatever I like, whenever I like.”

I was stupefied by the change in the girl, but Tohko took a step forward, pulling at my shirt.

“I’m Tohko Amano, president of the book club. Are you the one leaving strange notes in our mailbox every night?”

“That’s right. I wrote those letters. At the manor, Uncle Hironobu and the others are always watching and criticize everything I do.”

“Are the letters for us? Or for someone else?”

The girl jutted her slender chin and turned away curtly at the question.

“I won’t tell you that. I’m going home. You’ve interrupted me, and it’s not fun anymore.”

She stuffed the notebook and writing implement into her schoolbag, closed the top, and then stood up and walked briskly away without so much as brushing off the grass stuck to her skirt.

Wow, she really is leaving…

“Hold on! What are these numbers?”

Tohko grabbed the notes from her pocket and thrust them toward the girl.

She turned around and narrowed her eyes impishly. “That’s a secret only he and I know.”

I felt as if her sweet, sensual eyes had penetrated my heart, and I shuddered.

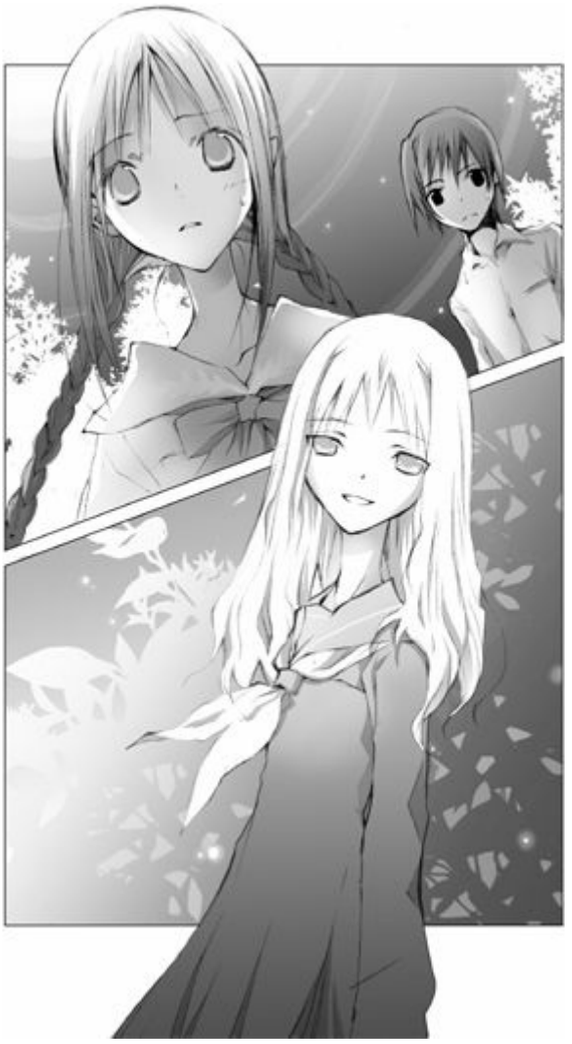
The girl looked about the same age as us, but her eyes were so mature and eerie.

Like someone who hasn’t passed on and has been alive a very, very long time.

“Wait!”

Tohko grabbed the girl’s arm and held her back. As soon as she touched her, Tohko seemed to be startled by something. Her dark eyes were wide with fright, but she planted her feet firmly and continued.

“L-look… If you’re doing this because something’s bothering you, you can talk to me about it. I’ll listen.”



The girl started laughing. “Heh-heh-heh, heh, hee-hee…” Her tittering sounded breezy, but it was strident and morbid. Tohko must have grown frightened at last. Her grip slackened.

The girl slipped out of her grasp and then quirked her mouth into a pretty smile.

“Heh-heh. There’s no point. *I’m already dead, after all.*”

A chill pierced my spine.

Tohko’s eyes widened, and she lurched back.

Still laughing, the girl ran to the school gates. Her chestnut hair swayed bewitchingly below her shoulders, and the hem of her skirt whipped around her as if in dance. Her pale calves bounded away entrancingly through the moonlight. I watched her go, unable to say a word.

Her thin body bobbed like a mirage before finally melting into the darkness.

“Tohko!”

I rushed over to her. She grabbed my shirt and then said in a quavering voice, “Th-that girl… her arms were so thin. It felt like an old woman’s arm, like she was more than a hundred years old. It was nothing but bone and skin.”

“Do you think she was real?”

“It couldn’t…”

She tried to stand back up, but her legs collapsed feebly beneath her. Tohko’s shoulders slumped, and she looked up at me with a pathetic expression as she confessed, “What am I going to do, Konoha? I’m petrified.”

Chapter 2 – Who Is That?

She was dead…

He was disappointed when he learned of it upon his return to the country.

What had happened? Why was she not there?

His revenge against her was the only thing that had propelled him. She had betrayed him. He had come back to this land in order to drag her down to hell and force her to atone.

And yet she was dead? She, the other half of his soul?

His world fractured, his soul was thrown into a turbulent ocean, and he sank beneath the raging black waves.

He pounded at the walls so often that he might have shattered his fists, and he howled like a wild animal.

"Um… well… just so there's no misunderstanding. It wasn't because I was scared of the ghost that I couldn't stand up. I have a bad back, and it was just acting up."

An hour after we'd seen the ghost in the school yard, Tohko and I were walking through a darkened neighborhood, huddling close together.

It wasn't a flirtatious thing. Tohko had been scared stiff and was totally unable to walk on her own, so I had to walk her home.

"I swear, it's just a bad back. Not because of the ghost. I sprained my back when I was little, and it's just flaring up," she persisted, her face a deep red, wobbling and clinging to my arm.

Amazingly, even in a state like this, Tohko had proclaimed, "I'm going after the

ghost!” and forced herself to her feet. She had then wheeled forward and face-planted into the grass. The tip of her nose was still red.

“I never heard about you having a bad back before.”

My bag was slung over my left shoulder, and I carried Tohko’s bag in that same hand. With my right, I supported her. When I took my jab at her through ragged breaths, she drooped her head, apparently in the repentance I had expected.

“I’m *so* sorry! I’m an awful role model.”

Maybe I was being too harsh… But no, if I let up now, she would definitely get cocky.

“If you realize that, then why don’t you stay away from crazy stuff like this? No matter how flat chested you may be, you’re still a girl, so—ow!”

Tohko’s face immediately transformed, and she pinched my cheeks hard.

“You’re awful! That’s sexual harassment! You should have more respect for your elders.”

She pulled at my cheeks, clamped between her thumb and forefinger.

“Owwww. And I think you should have more consideration for people younger than you.”

“I can walk on my own now. You can go.”

“You’re still wobbling, though.”

“After that corner, I’m only another minute or two from home. I’ll manage.”

She pursed her lips and turned curtly away.

“You’re *awful!*”

We heard the shrill voice of a girl nearby.

“Just what am I to you, Ryu?”

“Yeah, let’s hear it! Are you going to pick me or her?”

“Hey! Don’t pretend like I’m not here!”

It sounded like some people were getting worked up to fight around the next corner. Tohko and I peeked around at them and saw three girls surrounding a

boy, shouting at one another under a streetlight.

All three of the girls were fuming, snapping at each other: “I’m the one dating Ryu!” “You’re just in the way!” “No, you are!” It looked like the boy had been three-timing. But even though it was his fault, he was doing nothing to stop the girls. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he had his arms folded casually. He was tall and broad shouldered, a manly physique that meant he was probably an athlete or something. His clothes and hairstyle were casual, too. He looked like someone girls would go crazy over. Was he a college student?

“Look, why don’t we go somewhere else? Getting into it here is gonna get me in trouble. We’re right next to my house.”

When the boy said that, I felt a frigid jolt down my spine.

I looked over and saw Tohko grinding her teeth, charging up her rage for some reason.

Huh? Wait, what? Why is Tohko angry? I started to panic in my ignorance.

Tohko grabbed her bag out of my hand and strode forward.

But, Tohko—what about your back?

Her eyes burned and she squared her shoulders, but all of that obliterated in the face of her rage. She headed straight toward the group of arguing girls.

Then her bag arced over her head and she shouted, “*Ryuto!* Take that!”

“Urk—Tohko!”

The boy’s eyes bugged out as she swung her bag down right into his face.

There was a *whump* as her bag and his face collided. The girls around him recoiled. I was gaping myself.

“I can’t believe you! How often have we told you not to start these fights near the house? What will the neighbors think? And now you’re three-timing again! How can you like girls that much? Don’t you have even a shred of loyalty?”

The boy had been knocked back onto the ground, and Tohko was peppering his head and face with blows, using both hands.

The girls were frozen in terror at Tohko’s aggression. I quickly ran over to her

and caught her arms behind her back.

“Stop, Tohko! I don’t know what’s going on, but you can’t hit people. You have to calm down or you’ll hurt your back again.”

“You stay out of this, Konoha!”

Tohko shook my arms off and turned to the girls frostily.

“You girls would be a lot better off at home reading the complete works of Sōseki Natsume instead of arguing over a worthless, three-timing guy like this. Start with his collection of interconnected short stories, *Ten Nights’ Dreams*! The aesthetic, phantasmagoric stories have the flavor of a mature wine. Drink yourselves silly on the unparalleled fragrance and warmth of the poetic sentences slipping down your throat! You’ll be grateful you were born Japanese. Once you finish reading that, you start his first trilogy. Even more powerful emotion is waiting for you in that.”

The girls’ mouths hung open while she said her piece in utter seriousness. Then Tohko grabbed the boy sharply by the ear. “We’re going home now, Ryuto.”

“Ow! Quit it, quit it, quit-it!”

Just like that, she dragged the boy away, though he was bigger and beefier than her, sailing off down the moonlit street.

“Wh-what just happened?”

“I-I’m not sure. What’s a first trilogy?”

“The real question is how that girl knows Ryu!”

I stood in shocked silence beside the girls as they muttered.

How *did* Tohko know that guy?

The next morning, I left home at my usual time and headed to school. Along the way, I spotted a long braid like a cat tail swinging out from behind a utility pole.

“Look who it is…”

Tohko emerged sheepishly, ducking her head with her face bright red, holding an open paperback in her hand. “Good morning, Konoha.”

It looked very much like she had been waiting for me. There was color high in her cheeks when she bowed her head.

“I’m sorry about yesterday. You were nice enough to walk me home, but then I just lost it and forgot all about you… I’m really sorry.”

Tohko seemed to feel truly bad about it. She looked like she was worried that I would be angry at her, and she kept peeking out at me from behind her copy of Atsushi Nakajima’s *Legend of Moon Mountain.* The fact that she had come expressly to apologize did a lot to placate me, but something still bothered me.

“Who’s that Ryuto guy? You guys seemed to know each other pretty well.”

Tohko answered with some difficulty. “I board with a family, and Ryuto is their son, so he’s sort of like my little brother.”

“You board with a family? Are your parents in the goblin lands?”

She quickly swatted me with her fist. “Stop calling me a goblin!”

Tohko pouted, prickling with anger, because she said it wounded a girl’s innocent heart to be called a goblin and she didn’t know how I could be so careless. I still wondered whether her parents were really goblins and just where they were and what they were doing after leaving their daughter in someone’s house, and whether the people Tohko was staying with knew that she chewed up books, but I didn’t think I could ask about any of that.

I gave up. “We’re going to be late,” I said and started walking.

“Wait for me!”

Tohko hurried after me.

“So what do you think that supernatural phenomenon last night really was? And that girl…”

As we walked side by side to school, I changed the subject. Tohko bent her mouth into a frown and folded her arms.

“It has to be some kind of trick. I’m going to figure it out.”

“What? You still want to continue the investigation?”

I was astounded, but Tohko replied crisply, “Of course.”

At the school entrance, she waved good-bye and headed off to the third-year lockers. “I’ll see you later, Konoha.”

She hadn’t repented at all!

The day had just started, and I was already exhausted. As I headed to my classroom, a classmate called out to me, “Morning.”

I returned his greeting. “Oh. Morning, Akutagawa.”

Lately, I’d spent a lot of time with Akutagawa in class. He was a sedate guy, both inside and out, tall and taciturn. He never said more than he needed to and never got emotional. He had an unswerving spirit that was like a strong tree, and it was easy to be around him. He wasn’t a particularly close friend, but I found a certain distance pleasant these days.

“Did you do the math homework? Can I check my answers against yours?”

“Sure.”

We opened up our notebooks and started talking when Akutagawa poked me in the arm and subtly pointed behind me.

I turned around and saw our classmate Kotobuki watching me reproachfully.

Not again…

Kotobuki had some kind of animosity toward me and was always glaring at me like that. I had once overheard her telling some girls in our class that she hated me. Apparently it made her uncomfortable that I gave feeble, deliberate-looking smiles so that no one would know what I was actually thinking.

But would she be so persistent about giving me dirty looks just because I bugged her? What had I done to her?

Akutagawa signaled “see you” with his eyes and then moved away nonchalantly.

Kotobuki took a step forward, then pulled back, then fiddled with her manicured nails, looking conflicted. But when she realized I was watching her, she blushed and came up to me.

“What do you want, Kotobuki?”

She pinched her lips in annoyance and curtly answered, “Nothing from you.”

She had lovely dyed brown hair. She also had long, shapely legs and large breasts, which made her extremely popular with the boys in our class. Apparently they even liked this harshness of hers because they said it hid a softer side. But I had never once seen Kotobuki soften up. I couldn’t picture her ever smiling sweetly for a boy she liked.

“If you don’t want anything, then I’d like to review for math.”

“What a jerk. You think acting like the perfect student impresses me?”

“… Did you want to chat, Kotobuki?”

“N-no way. Why would you say that? I would never talk to you—I just—” Kotobuki looked away and then muttered with the barest hint of timidity, “You came to school with Amano this morning, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb. You two came in together.”

Her gaze fell on me again and she leaned forward pointedly.

“I’m not playing dumb… I was just wondering how you knew that.”

“I just happened to see you! It’s not like I was watching for you! But since you came in side by side, I just thought maybe you had come together on purpose… N-n-not that I care even if you did, of course. Nobody cares about you, Inoue. But Amano has helped me out at the library, so I owe her my respect.”

That caught me off guard.

“Really? You found something to respect about her?”

Was there something about Tohko that an underclassman could look up to?

Kotobuki answered, her face red, “She reads a lot of books, and she knows practically everything about the library. And she doesn’t have a big head about how beautiful she is. She’s nice.”

Hmmmmm.

“Why do you look so suspicious? Is there something wrong with me looking up to her?”

“Ha-ha-ha… I guess not.”

Sometimes it was better not knowing the truth. Tohko was lucky that anyone looked up to her, so why destroy Kotobuki’s image of her?

My fake smile seemed to rub Kotobuki the wrong way, and she snorted and looked away.

“*Anyway,* I just wanted to know why Amano would come to school with *you*.”

“We ran into each other on the way, so we came in together.”

It wasn’t actually that accidental, but I didn’t want to bother explaining all the details. I played it off nonchalantly instead.

Kotobuki threw me a glance.

“Hmph. Okay then.”

Then she turned her back on me and went back to her seat.

Maybe Kotobuki had such a huge grudge against me because she was jealous that I was always with Tohko?

I was in the middle of a lunch my mother had packed for me when Tohko dropped by.

“Hey! Konoha!”

Her clear voice rang out from the door at the back of the room, and she waved me over with a grin.

“What’s going on?”

Kotobuki was sitting with a group of friends. She had just taken a bite of her melon bread, but she froze and glowered at me, pinching her lips. I could feel her gaze stabbing into my back as I went out into the hallway. Tohko’s eyes were gleaming, and she grabbed my hand exuberantly.

“I found the girl from last night, Konoha.”

“You what?”

“I knew she wasn’t a ghost! Come on!”

Tohko dragged me with her down the hall.

“You mean, that Kayano Kujo girl? And could you please let go of my hand? It’s embarrassing.”

“Fine, fine.” Tohko snickered and released me. “But yes, I saw her coming out of the bathroom during a break, and I followed her.”

“You sound like a deviant.”

We stopped at a second-year classroom. Seijoh Academy was a big school, so even though the girl and I both were second-years, the room was pretty far away from mine.

“That’s her.”

I peeked in through the door at the back of the room with Tohko. The room was alive with activity during the lunch break, but a girl with midlength hair sat in the middle of it all alone.

The other girls had moved their desks together with their friends’ and were talking animatedly over their lunches. She was the only one who didn’t have a lunch on her desk, and she wasn’t even reading or studying. She sat with her head bent slightly down, not moving a muscle, not even blinking, like an object made of ashen glass. What I could see of her face and her morbidly thin limbs was identical to the girl we had seen in the school yard last night.

“Am I right?”

“But she seems totally different. Didn’t she seem more imposing yesterday?”

“She could be sleepy because she was out so late.”

“You think so?”

As we whispered back and forth, the girl silently stood up.

No one took any notice. She set off with a vacant expression and went through the door at the front of the classroom.

“Do you think she noticed us?”

“It didn’t look like it.”

“Let’s follow her.”

“What? Hey, Tohko—”

I can't believe this… I followed Tohko helplessly.

The girl moved down the hallway with unsteady steps and then descended the stairs. Her legs peeked out beneath her skirt like dainty stalks supporting a white flower. They looked like they would snap under the slightest pressure.

"Where do you think she's going?"

"Maybe she's going to go buy some food?"

"Then she's going the wrong way."

About halfway down the stairs, Tohko called out, "Can we talk to you?"

As the girl was descending the final step, her body pitched forward, and she crumpled to the ground.

The two of us ran down the stairs and bent over her.

The girl was curled up limply, her eyes closed. Up close her skin was so pale it seemed transparent, and her collarbone was visible at the neck of her uniform.

"Wake up! What's wrong?"

Tohko shouted at her, but the girl didn't open her eyes. She was like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Konoha, you take that side. We're taking her to the nurse's office. Slowly now."

"Got it."

Supporting the girl on either side, we stood her up. When I picked up her arm, I was astounded by how frail and unresponsive it was. She was as light as Styrofoam.

When I had helped carry Tohko home the night before, I'd been glad that she was such a wisp, but this girl was way past slender or even delicate. I couldn't feel any weight to her body, and it made me wonder if there was anything inside her at all.

When we reached the nurse's office on the first floor, the nurse shouted, "Not again! I've told her again and again that she needs to eat right, but she's still going on with her insane diet."

We laid our cargo on a bed as the woman muttered.

The girl's eyes fluttered open and the nurse lectured her furiously.

"Amemiya, this is the fourth time you've been brought to me because of your anemia. Didn't I tell you to eat properly and follow the menu I gave you? But your arms are thinner than ever! You weigh much less than you ought to. There is no need whatsoever for you to lose even one more ounce with this diet. You don't have to do it all at once, but you must make an effort to eat."

The girl—Amemiya—sat up silently in the bed, her eyes downcast.

"Did you hear me, Amemiya?"

"Yes… I'm sorry," she whispered, her thin body drawing in on itself, feebly defenseless. It reminded me of a tiny, meek animal.

"I'll give you some vitamins. I want you to take them with you."

When the nurse went into the next room, Amemiya got out of bed and slipped her tiny, babylike feet into her white sandals.

She looked over at us and silently dipped her head.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I'm sorry to trouble you."

She seemed on the verge of fading from reality. She was a completely different girl from the night before. I was bewildered. Tohko seemed troubled as well.

"Um, Amemiya? My name is Tohko Amano. I'm a third-year. This is Konoha Inoue, and he's a second-year student. I think we met you last night in the school yard."

Amemiya responded to the inquiry with a blank look. "No."

"Well, we talked to a girl who looks exactly like you yesterday. Her name was Kayano Kujo."

Amemiya flinched.

"You recognize that name, don't you?"

Tohko leaned forward.

Amemiya's face lost all of its color and her lips trembled. She didn't try to

speak.

The nurse came back with the pills.

“All right, now you must take these. And eat your meals, too.”

Amemiya accepted the pills with a small, bony hand and started to leave the room.

“Wait! Are you really not the girl we met?”

The girl’s thin shoulders were trembling again. Without looking up, Amemiya murmured, “I think… you must have met my ghost.”

Tohko’s breath caught. I felt as if in that moment the air had frozen solid.

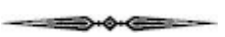
I’m already dead, after all.

Kayano’s words echoed through my mind once more.

Did that mean that Amemiya and Kayano were the same person and that Kayano was a ghost who possessed her? The word *ghost* was on the notes she’d left for us, too. That and *hate you* and *it hurts*…

Had the ghost possessing Amemiya written those mysterious numbers, too?

Amemiya told us nothing more. She bit her lip painfully and bowed her head; then she left the nurse’s office.



He swung a pickax down on the grave where she rested.

A pale flash of lightning illuminated his wet form in the darkness, and rain pelted against his skin like shrapnel. His hair tossed about in the gusting wind, and with bloodshot eyes he cried out.

“Kayano! Kayano! Come back to me!

“I would reverse the flow of time if it meant I could see you once more! I would bring the dead back to life!”

The graveyard was an endless forest of crosses planted over the dead, but there was only one soul he sought.

Sweat and rain dripped from his hair and over his brow, and his eyes grew ravenous. As he continued to dig into her grave, he was a man possessed.

Yes. It was not over. She had betrayed him, had crushed their beautiful dollhouse underfoot, had trod it into dust. She had cruelly ridiculed his hopes. She had never paid for it. Half of his soul had been torn out and shredded. She would never understand the true depths of his despair and hatred.

I will never forgive you for leaving me behind. **Until his revenge was complete, she would have no peace.**

"Wake up, Kayano!

"The other half of your soul calls to you from atop your grave!

"Open your casket and crawl out of the dark, damp earth!

"You will atone for it! With your body, your voice, your hair, your lips, your entire existence!"

"Hmm. Hotaru Amemiya, eh?"

Classes were over for the day. Maki had come to the school yard to see how Tohko was feeling (or rather, to tease her about seeing ghosts), and after Tohko had told her the entire story of the night before, her lips curled into an unexpected smile of pleasure.

"My, my, this is certainly getting eerie, Tohko."

"What does that mean?"

Tohko looked up at Maki, clearly wishing she would leave. Tohko was carrying on the stakeout undaunted, and I was with her, a physics book open in my lap. But all I could think was, *The exams are next week*…

"Do you know her, Maki?"

"She was a year below me in middle school. We were in the art club together. She's very reserved, so I barely ever talked to her. There's a rumor about Hotaru Amemiya, though."

"More rumors?" Tohko glowered.

"You haven't heard? Anyone who gets close to her is cursed."

"C-cursed—?" Tohko's voice was choked, and even I looked up without

meaning to.

Maki gazed sadistically at the tense rictus of Tohko's face and then continued. "That's right. Hotaru Amemiya tends to find herself at the center of supernatural events. Horrible things happen to the people who get involved with her, things that put their lives in danger. You two should be careful. Although maybe you've already been cursed?"

Tohko shook her head firmly and stood up.

"Are you serious? Maybe you could scare an elementary school kid with ghosts and curses and all this unscientific nonsense. Obviously Amemiya knows something about Kayano Kujo. When I asked her about it in the nurse's office, she told me it was her ghost, but if I let that scare me and gave up, I would lose the respect of the book club's alumni. Yeah! So what if she's cursed? I'm a book girl, and I've read the legendary folklorist Kunio Yanagita's *Legends of Tono* cover to cover!"

"How valiant," Maki joked, applauding.

I had reached the conclusion that I couldn't be involved in this anymore, so I closed my book and stood up.

"Ready, Konoha? We're going to keep watch tonight and catch Kayano Kujo and expose this conspiracy… Hey, where are you going? Konoha?"

"I'm going to the bathroom."

"With your bag?"

"I want to make sure my eyebrows are on straight and fix my blush."

As I walked away, Tohko shouted after me, "No way! You don't wear makeup, do you? Hey, what are you laughing at, Maki? N-no! He's not abandoning me. Right, Konoha? You're coming back, right? Promise! Hey, are you listening? Konoha! Konohaaa!"

Of course, I didn't have the slightest intention of going back.

I would be lying if I said I didn't wonder about the link between Kayano Kujo and Hotaru Amemiya. The events of the night before had carved an unforgettable impression into my heart, and Amemiya's words were deep with

meaning. I had as much curiosity as anyone else.

But I wasn't about to get wrapped up in this hassle more than I already had been. Most important of all, the midterms were coming up fast. Club activities should have been suspended before the exams. Tohko would probably give up and go home soon enough.

As I was hurrying away through the school yard, a girl who had been in my class last year came running up to me with some other girls, looking pleased. "Konoha! There you are!"

Huh? What was this?

"There's a *super*-hot guy looking for you. Hurry up!"

Surrounded by the giggling group of girls, I was hurried off without any explanation. We passed Kotobuki on the way, and she watched me go by, wide-eyed.

When we reached the school gates, the guy Tohko had hit and knocked to the ground the night before was standing there.

"What's up. Remember me?"

"You're Tohko's—"

"Ryuto Sakurai. Pleased to meet ya, Konoha."

He bent his giant body to greet me and then tossed a grin to the girls. "Muchas gracias for bringin' him. See ya around."

He gave the girls a wink; then he grabbed my arm and started walking off. "Let's go somewhere quieter."

I heard the girls sighing longingly behind us and hurried to speak up. "H-hold on, you're—"

"Call me Ryuto. You're older than me and all."

"I am?"

Now that he mentioned it, I realized that he'd been wearing street clothes last night, but today he was wearing a school uniform. The insignia was for a boys' school nearby. And if he was younger than me, that meant…

“You’re a first-year?!”

“Sure am. I managed to pass last year.”

He’d been in middle school until last year—with a body like that?! And now that he was a first-year in high school, he was three-timing and having lovers’ quarrels on the street at night? Who *was* this guy?

“Do you need something from me? How do you know my name?”

“Tohko talks about you at home. Today Konoha wrote me such and such a story; he wrote me that; it was sweet; it was spicy; it was bitter; it was salty. All of that.”

I caught my breath and not just in embarrassment that Tohko talked about me so much.

“You know that Tohko eats stories?”

Ryuto looked at me and a corner of his mouth twitched up.

“Yeah, I do. We *do* live together. Every morning for breakfast she eats kids’ books like *Guri and Gura* or *The Children of Noisy Village.* She tells us everything about it, then rips through it in total glee.”

When I heard that, I felt as if some nameless indignation had pierced my heart. It didn’t really matter… So what if someone else knew Tohko’s secret? So what if he knew her better than I did? But for some reason my stomach knotted.

I carefully removed my arm from his grasp.

“Do you eat books, too?”

“What do *you* think?”

His sculpted, masculine lips curled into another smile. His eyes were like a carnivore’s, and when I looked into them, I felt my heart and body shrinking. It was sort of similar to how Maki made me feel.

“In any case, you want to go get something to eat? Then you’ll know if I’m like Tohko or not.”

The place he chose was a fast-food restaurant decorated to look like a Western saloon. The tables and chairs were made of dark brown wood, and a dartboard

hung on the wall.

Once there, Ryuto ordered a hamburger at least six inches thick piled with bacon, lettuce, mushrooms, and cheese; a mountain of french fries sprinkled with basil; and a large soda.

“There you go, Ryu.”

“ ’Preciate it, Harumi.”

An older girl he seemed to know brought his hamburger out, and he turned on the charm. Then he dug into his food.

He opened his mouth wide, smearing red ketchup on the corners of his mouth, and swallowed ravenously before shoveling French fries as big around as his thumb into his mouth.

Leaving the French toast and herbal tea I’d ordered untouched on the table, I just stared at Ryuto as he ate.

Tohko was capable of eating the same things we ate. She could take a bite of food and swallow it, but she had told me that it had no taste whatsoever, just like if we tried to eat paper.

Tohko’s concepts of “sweetness” and “spiciness” were not strictly the same as ours, because she had no idea what shortcake or apple pie tasted like. She simply used her imagination to draw parallels between the foods we ate and what she tasted in books so that she could gush about them.

Mm. This must be what a warm apple pie with whipped cream tastes like.

So the fact that Ryuto was devouring his hamburger with such zeal didn’t mean he was an ordinary human being. It could have been just an act.

But…

“Aren’t you gonna eat? It’s a lot better when it’s still warm.”

“… You set me up.”

He was just a normal human being like the rest of us who ate bread and drank water after all. He had led me on, and I had gone along with it completely.

“That’s not very nice. All I did was ask if you wanted to get somethin’ to eat.”

He really was a lot like Maki—like how he could have a smile on his face and something totally different up his sleeve.

I couldn't believe that in trying to escape Tohko I'd gotten snatched up by the son of the family she lived with. I had a bad feeling I was about to get wrapped up in some kind of trouble.

I stuck a fork into a piece of my French toast and asked grumpily, "So? What did you want? Is this about Tohko?"

"Nah, this has nothing to do with her. Actually, you need to keep it quiet from her."

He wiped the ketchup off his mouth with a thumb and then licked it off.

"There's a girl I like at your school. Do you think you could help me out?"

How had things turned out this way? He had removed all of the people in his way and was finally about to claim her—and now this. Why?

Everything had been proceeding according to plan. He had employed every possible means to restore the dollhouse she had annihilated, and he had not feared even to dip his hands in blood or to commit sacrilege against God.

There was no God in this world, anyway. The devil was already laughing at his side, and that was the most reliable ally of all.

No, he had made no mistakes. But when he had come here, everything had been headed toward ruin.

There was no time.

He had to go back.

He needed to go back in time to the day that he met her.

If it would grant his wish, he would give the devil his soul or anything else.

There was no time.

He felt light-headed, and a strangled cry escaped his throat. His stomach twisted painfully and nausea rose up in him.

Would she be taken again? Would she betray him again? Would she mock

his dreams and run from him?

He would not allow it!

He would reach his hands out to her small face, wavering like a mirage, and he would crush it like a tomato.

He would not allow it! He would not allow it! He would not allow it! He would not allow it! He would not allow it!

The next day after first period ended, Tohko came to my classroom with a deep frown on her face.

“Why did you leave yesterday, Konoha? I waited soooo long for you. I’d checked *The Long Goodbye* by Raymond Chandler out of the library, so I started reading it, and I actually finished the whole thing.”

“Um, well… I’m glad you could have a nice, relaxing read outside.”

I tried to smile when I said it, but Tohko slapped her hand down on my desk and leaned in toward me.

Oh god—everyone was looking at me. Kotobuki was glaring.

“That’s not all! Do you have any idea the kind of fear I experienced after you left yesterday?”

“N-no, I don’t. Did something happen?”

As soon as I asked, Tohko looked like she was about to cry. Her lip was trembling feebly.

“S-since you never came back, I went to the club room to look for you, and there was a bouquet of black lilies on the table.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a birthday present from one of your fans?”

“My birthday is a long ways away. And don’t black lilies make you think of anything, Konoha?”

“Not really.”

“Black lilies mean ‘cursed.’ ”

“So you’re saying you were cursed?”

Tohko covered her ears with both hands and shook her head desperately. Her long braids danced through the air together.

“No! Don’t say it! I refuse to accept it! But… you know…” She looked at me, her eyes timid once again. “I would be even more cursed if I threw them out, so I got a beaker from the chem lab to put them in, and I heard a girl crying outside. But when I opened the door, no one was there. I was sure I was just imagining things, so I closed the door. But then I heard her sobbing again. This time I walked really quietly and tried to open the door slooowly… but there was still no one there. I thought I must be so tired that I was hearing things, so I decided to go home. And on my way—”

I gulped, and Tohko looked at me forlornly. “*Three* black cats crossed my path!”

I nearly buried my head on my desk.

“There’s more. A flock of crows flew by overhead, too!”

“Because it was nighttime and the crows were going home, too.”

“And then this morning, this was in my locker.”

Tohko showed me a white envelope.

“A love letter?”

“No.”

She pulled a letter out and unfolded it; then she held it out to me. It was a chain letter. One of those things that said you had to send the same thing to five different people in a week or you would have bad luck.

“I’ve never seen a real chain letter before.”

“I haven’t, either, not since elementary school when they were trendy for a little while. L-look at who it’s from, Konoha.”

Tohko trembled as she pointed at the signature. It read, “Sincerely, The Ghost.”

This looked more like a prank than an actual curse…

“And then? This morning there was another note inside the mailbox. And

that's stepped way up, toooooo!"

Tohko showed me the stepped-up note.

"Hmm."

It certainly had been stepped up: The note looked like brush writing on singed and yellowed paper and mentioned disturbing things like a "herd of possessed swine," "I'm come home," and "I shall make you swallow the carving knife."

"We have to do something about this right away or else the book club is going to get attacked by a herd of possessed pigs! I'm going to get a butcher knife with a ribbon around it instead of a bouquet of black lilies. The book club is facing a threat to its very existence, Konoha."

"We've been standing on that precipice for a while, in my opinion."

We did have only two members, after all. That didn't quite rise to the level of an actual club.

Tohko glared at me sharply.

"Try to be serious about this, Konoha. Listen, come to the club room as soon as school lets out today. We have to work out our strategy. Promise?"

The bell announcing the end of break rang, and after making doubly and triply sure, Tohko scrambled off.

Kotobuki had been glowering at me the entire time.

Geez.

I felt bad for Tohko, but I had plans after school.

During class, I gazed out the window and thought back over what Ryuto had told me the day before.

"There's a girl I like at your school. She's a second-year like you. Name's Hotaru Amemiya… You know her, Konoha?"

Did I know her? Wasn't that the girl Tohko and I had carried to the nurse's office? I was flabbergasted.

"Actually, we're already going out, but something seems off. It's not going well, I guess."

Ryuto just kept saying one astonishing thing after another.

“What?! But don’t you have other girlfriends? Three of them?”

“Oh yeah, I’m going out with them, too. There’s two or three others. Or is it four or five? They change so fast, I can’t keep track.”

I stared wide-eyed at Ryuto, but he laughed it off without the slightest sign of guilt.

“If you’ve got that many girls, who cares if it’s not going well with one of them? I mean, do you actually like Amemiya?”

“Well, to be honest, it’s more like I think I’ll like her a whole lot *soon*.”

“What does that mean?”

I was appalled, but Ryuto’s eyes gleamed lustily.

“She’s seriously dangerous, and I like that.”

“You like dangerous people?”

I understood him even less.

But just like when Tohko was expounding on books, a fire had been lit under Ryuto.

“I don’t like ordinary girls. But a girl who would kill a guy to make him hers and then kiss his still-warm lips… a girl like Oscar Wilde’s Salomé? They drive me crazy. Like Kiyohime turning into a snake to chase her man or the grocery girl Oshichi who set fire to a building just to see hers one more time. I want to be loved like that, be obsessed over, be hated.

“Psychologically speaking, I’m a masochist. It gives me a huge thrill for a girl to insult me when there’s both love and hatred in her eyes. After all, hatred is the strongest emotion people have, right? Love weakens and changes over time, but *true* hatred can’t be forgotten that easily. It only gets stronger as time goes by. Don’t you agree? I feel like being hated makes love last way longer. You can keep hating someone because you love them, and you can keep loving them because you hate them.”

I was utterly overwhelmed by this philosophy of love. It was so unusual for a

first-year high school boy. I heard him out, wide-eyed, telling myself that the guy was trouble. But when he declared that hatred was the strongest of all human emotions, I felt as if cold fingers had caressed my heart.

Ryuto continued talking across the table from me, but he grew fuzzy and in his place a girl appeared, looking at me with piercing eyes.

Miu—!

It was the same look Miu had given me that day when she'd gone home by herself and I'd called out to stop her.

A cold gaze like a knife carved out of ice.

Until then, we had been best friends, and Miu had always teased me and told me how much she liked me in a bouncing voice and smiled happily.

But that day, there was such hatred in Miu's eyes as she looked at me that it instantly eradicated everything that had come before.

Why had Miu looked at me that way? Did she hate me?

Whenever I remembered Miu, my heart always clamped tight, and the pain made it hard to breathe.

I couldn't think about Miu right now. I couldn't remember those eyes.

Desperately, I banished Miu's phantom. I could almost hear her breathing in my ears. I tried to focus on what Ryuto was saying.

"You date a bunch of girls at once because you want them to hate you?" I asked in a voice that threatened to crack if I wasn't careful, and I knit my numb fingers together tightly.

Ryuto murmured, "Yeah. I love it when they're jealous or possessive. But Hotaru is different. We're dating, but she's not even a tiny bit obsessed with me. She's kind of vacant, like her mind is somewhere else. She's always been like that."

"How did you meet her?"

"It was about a month ago in a park. It was raining and superwindy, and she was riding on the swings in the middle of the night. She was wearing an old-style

sailor suit, and even though lightning was cracking overhead and her hair and clothes were totally soaked, she was swinging fanatically, standing up on the swing. When I saw that, I thought she was amazing.”

Swinging in the middle of a storm, Amemiya slipped and was thrown to the ground. Ryuto had run over to her and lifted her up, and that was how the two of them started going out.

Ryuto leaned forward and grinned like a little kid.

“I guess I was inspired? I had this feeling that I had finally met the ideal woman, or like she would be someone important to me. Hotaru is definitely the kind of girl who doesn’t worry about what she has to do in order to get what she wants or how it looks. If a guy gets jumpy, she’ll chase him and chase him and then devour him in order to be together. I always felt like if I could meet a girl like that, she’s all I would ever need.”

His story was all over the place, but Ryuto looked innocently happy as he spoke of her.

For the first time, he looked like a high school boy, just like me.

When I was in middle school, I had thought that Miu was special and different from all the other girls.

Miu was the epitome of what a girl should be for me.

There was Miu, and there was me. I thought things would go on that way forever.

“I asked if she would go out with me, and she said yeah, so I’m pretty sure she realizes we’re dating. But she’s not into me at all. She doesn’t see me, but she’s still going out with me. We go on dates even. And she doesn’t run away when I kiss her even. Weird, right? Like, why is she with me? I started thinking maybe she had some kind of problem she was dealing with, and it started to bug me. And ever since Hotaru and I started going out, strange stuff keeps happening.”

“Like what?”

I remembered what Maki had told us in the school yard: Anyone who got close to Hotaru Amemiya was cursed.

“A menacing guy in sunglasses follows us all the time. He might’ve been about forty? He was wearing a suit, and his hair was dyed a light color. He wasn’t dressed bad or anything, but there was something sinister about him, like he was dead even though he was alive or something… He was like an angel of death.

“Whenever I meet up with Hotaru, eventually I notice him staring at us from a little ways off. I think Hotaru notices, too, and whenever he’s there, she holds on to my arm and shakes and begs me not to look back and not to leave her. It sounds like she’s going to cry. But even after I ask her who he is, she won’t answer.

“And that’s not all. When I’m walking at night, Long John Silver and his gang—or at least some meathead guys who look like that—show up and start pounding on me and telling me to stay away from Hotaru, or they chase me through the streets or almost run me over with a car. All kinds of dangerous stuff kept happening to me for a whole month.”

I gulped.

“I’m impressed you didn’t stop seeing Amemiya after all that.”

Ryuto waved it off. “I love having thrills like that in my life. It only makes me fight harder.”

I cherished peace and quiet too much to ever hope to understand a person like him.

Ryuto frowned. “I don’t care about me. Doesn’t matter if they stalk me or beat me up. I feel like Hotaru has serious problems, though.”

“You mean her personality?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind that, either. But she doesn’t eat at all. I brought her here a couple times and recommended all sorts of stuff, but she just said she wasn’t hungry. Even when I tried to order something for her and make her eat, she wouldn’t even try it, and she never drank any water.

“Once she collapsed from hunger in the middle of one of our dates. When I took her home, I found out she lives in a huge mansion, but I never saw a sign that anyone else actually lives there. I asked her where everyone was, but she didn’t say anything.

“That and sometimes she becomes a different person. When night falls or we go somewhere dark, she’ll cheer up or get grumpy real suddenly and start calling herself Kayano Kujo.”

I leaned in closer. “Really? She said Kayano Kujo? So Amemiya and Kayano Kujo are the same person?”

“Konoha, have you ever met Kayano?”

I explained to Ryuto what had been going on, but he seemed skeptical.

I told him that mysterious notes had been left in the relationship advice box that Tohko had set up. I told him that when Tohko and I had staked out the box, there had been some supernatural phenomena and a girl wearing an old sailor suit had appeared and that she had written things down in a notebook, then torn the paper up and put it in the mailbox. I told him that the girl had called herself Kayano.

Ryuto’s forehead wrinkled.

“Maybe she heard about it from me. I asked Hotaru if she knew about the

mailbox the book club had put up in the school yard, and I told her she could get romantic advice from it."

Without quite realizing it, Ryuto and I had become very intent in our discussion of the mysteries surrounding Amemiya.

"It would be a huge pain if you told Tohko about all this violent stuff that's been happening to me, so could you keep that a secret? And could you find out about Hotaru? Just whatever you can manage is fine."

I knew the request would turn out to be a pain and cursed myself, but I told Ryuto, "I don't think I'll be much help, but I can try asking her classmates."

"My motto is *supposed* to be 'A wise man courts no danger'…"

I sighed as I walked down the hallway during lunch.

I'd already stopped a boy named Morishita who had been in my class the year before and was in Amemiya's class this year. According to what he told me, the rumor was true that anyone who got close to Amemiya was cursed, and all the boys who had ever gone out with her had been hit by cars or had fallen down the stairs at train stations or had been sent to the hospital in similar ways.

"Amemiya seems so subdued. She's been out with that many boys?"

"I know, right? She's obviously pretty, but her reactions are dulled or something and she doesn't get excited about anything and she's just gloomy. She doesn't have any friends and doesn't fit in at all. She just zones out all through lunch and doesn't eat. I don't think anyone's ever seen her bring a lunch from home or buy anything to eat at school. That's anorexic, right?"

Morishita also told me about Amemiya's former boyfriends.

"I heard there were about five or six of them. At the end of first year, she suddenly started dating a bunch of guys. They were all known cheaters or gang kids or some other worthless kind of loser, and Amemiya even came to school with bruises on her face a couple times. The guys were probably hitting her."

Why would Amemiya go out with such awful boys and only briefly each time? Why did they all end up having some kind of accident?

Ryuto had mentioned being followed by a man like an angel of death wearing

sunglasses and being badgered to break up with Amemiya by some guys who looked like the pirates in *Treasure Island.* Had that happened to all the boys Amemiya had dated? But why?

Argh, it just keeps getting more complicated. I'm no detective, though… Too bad. I would at least tell Ryuto what I'd found out.

As for Tohko…

"I bet you're angry at me for blowing you off two days in a row."

I remembered how she had made me promise to meet her and pouted on her way out. I leaned my hand against the wall and groaned.

The pranks Tohko had told me about, half-sobbing, still nagged at me. But I suspected I would get better results and solve the mystery faster by helping Ryuto.

Besides, I had a hunch about the paranormal phenomena and who had sent the black lilies. If my suspicion was right, Tohko wasn't in any real danger. And in fact, it would be a big help for me if Tohko's attention was focused on the ghost.

My decision made, I went to the place where I had agreed to meet Ryuto after school.

When I got to the restaurant we'd visited the day before, I saw a girl extend a hand and suddenly slap Ryuto in the face.

"You… are… *awful!*"

The girl was older—she looked like a college student. She threw her glass of water on Ryuto and stormed out of the restaurant, shoulders thrown back.

"A-are you okay?"

"Oh, that happens all the time. She slapped me pretty hard. It was nice."

He was totally unfazed and calmly accepted the towel the waitress brought him.

"Sorry about that, Harumi."

"I'm used to it." The girl shrugged, smiling ruefully.

I was astounded. How often did this happen?

There was a hamburger, chili beans, and a soda on the table in front of him.

“You got here quick. Has your school started its midterms already?”

“No, I left early today.”

“You cut class?!”

“You could call it that.”

I could feel a headache coming on, but I told him what I’d heard at school.

“Hmph. So she dated a bunch of scumbags.”

You know, most people would say you’re not such a stand-up guy yourself…

“I also tried to find out about Kayano Kujo. Her name was on the student rolls seventeen years ago. She was enrolled at our school for her first and second years it looks like, but her name wasn’t on the graduation list, so I guess she left partway through her second year.”

“I see…”

Just then, as we were talking, two women called out to Ryuto simultaneously.

“Ryu! We’re here!”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ryu!”

One was a short-haired girl dressed in another school’s uniform, and the other was an older girl who looked like an office worker with her hair tied up. She wore a miniskirt.

A second glance revealed another girl behind the one with short hair. She wore the same uniform and fidgeted shyly.

“Are you three-timing *again*?!” I cried without thinking.

Ryuto smirked. “That’s not a very nice thing to say, Konoha.”

Then he turned to the girls brightly.

“Hey, Misaki, thanks. Er, you’re Sonoko Segawa, right? Hi, I’m Ryuto Sakurai. Thanks for comin’.”

“Uh, sure.”

The shy-looking girl turned bright red and shook her head.

“Hey now, Sonoko’s too serious for you. No seducing her. I only got her to come because you were so pushy about it.”

“Whoa, whoa. Oh, and Saeko’s here, too. Sorry to make you take off work early.”

“Oh, it’s fine! I had the day off anyway. This seemed like much more fun.”

The lady who looked like an office worker winked and then sat down in the chair Ryuto had pulled out for her.

“This is Konoha Inoue. He’s a second-year at Seijoh Academy.”

“Hey there. I’m Misaki Kaga, second-year at Takara Girls’ School.”

“Um, I’m her classmate, Sonoko Segawa.”

“And I’m Saeko Tachibana. I work in an office.”

After they each introduced themselves, I ducked my head, flustered. “Nice to meet you.”

What in the world was Ryuto thinking? Was he planning to start a dating service, getting this many girls together?

I looked at him suspiciously. Ryuto responded with that predatory glint again and smiled slyly.

“Segawa here was in Hotaru’s class in elementary school. She was friends with her.”

Surprised, I turned to look at Segawa, and she nodded quickly.

“My house was near Hotaru’s, too, so we were always in the same classes.”

I caught my breath, and Ryuto went on.

“Saeko works in Hotaru’s uncle’s company. I picked her up in a restaurant today at lunch, and she agreed to come.”

Picked her up?! *Today?*

“Heh, he sure did! You’re so forceful, Ryu. It’s so refreshing for a younger man to take the lead.”

“Geez, Ryu.”

Misaki must have kicked Ryuto’s leg under the table because he shouted in pain.

I saw him in a new light. This was not someone to be trifled with. Not just anyone could have brought all these people with connections to Amemiya together in one day.

Misaki pursed her lips and declared, “You’re going to make that up to me.”

“Okay, okay.” Ryuto nodded offhandedly. He turned back to us and amiably proclaimed, “All right, then. Let’s start with Segawa’s story. Has Hotaru always been like this, not eating anything?”

Segawa, who had once been Amemiya’s friend, shook her head.

“No, when we were little, she ate school lunches like everybody else, and twice a week when we brought lunch from home, she brought an extravagant lunch that the housekeeper had packed for her. She would let me have some.”

Segawa told us that Amemiya’s mother had gotten sick and died when they were in their first year of elementary school and a housekeeper had looked after the house.

Amemiya lived with her father and his younger sister in a huge mansion.

When she was in her first year of middle school, her aunt got married and left home. Very soon after that, Amemiya’s father died from a sudden heart attack, and two weeks later it was her aunt’s turn to die in an accident.

After she lost her family, her uncle by marriage—the man her aunt had married—became Amemiya’s guardian.

Segawa continued her story glumly.

“He forced the housekeeper and the driver to leave and sold the house. That was when Hotaru started acting strange.”

After she started living with her uncle, Amemiya gradually stopped eating. At first, she would eat a little of the school lunches and leave the rest, but she soon stopped eating altogether.

“It was like Hotaru was scared of eating. When it was time for lunch, she would start shaking, like she was terrified of something, then she would spin around and stare out the window… As soon as she took a bite of bread, her face would go pale, and she would jump up and run to the bathroom. I think she was throwing up, because when she came back she was so pallid. It hurt me to see her.

“I thought maybe things weren’t going well with her uncle, so I asked her about it, but her face tensed up and she didn’t answer. Then she started avoiding me and staying by herself. After that, she became disinterested in everything around her, like a doll, and her face was always a total blank. It was like her spirit had floated off to another world.”

Segawa seemed to think that Amemiya’s uncle was the cause for her strange behavior, and she fell silent, her face troubled.

On the other hand, Saeko, the office worker, was intensely interested. She murmured, “Hmmm. So the rumor that our boss killed his wife and brother-in-law in order to steal the company may not be so baseless after all, eh?”

I gaped at the viciousness of what she was saying.

Amemiya’s uncle was Tamotsu Kurosaki, and the company had originally belonged to Amemiya’s father. After her father’s death, Kurosaki owned the majority share and took over as company president.

“The official story is that he lived abroad for a long time, and he busted his tail over there. There’s no question he’s a capable man, and ever since he took over, the company has been doing better and better. And he’s very popular with the female employees. I mean, he’s still young; he’s single; he looks all right; and he has this aura that strangely titillates a girl’s heart. His hair is dyed, and he wears lightly tinted sunglasses because his eyes are sensitive or something, but they look good on him and it works for him, believe me. The older board members can’t stand his hair, but the rest of us really like it. When the last president was still alive, Mr. Kurosaki had black hair, but the day he took over as president, he showed up with his hair like that. It stunned the board members.

“Everything he does is flashy, though, so maybe he just makes a lot of enemies. The rumor that he killed the last boss has been going around ever since the day

he took over, and none of us would be surprised if the cops came one day and took him away. I think we might be expecting it."

What terrible things to say about a person. Amemiya's guardian was sounding like a very shady man.

"Oh! But lately Mr. Kurosaki has been acting weird."

"Weird how?" Ryuto leaned forward.

"I talked to his secretary, and she said he's barely been eating for the last month or so. He's been so busy with work that he's been staying at a condo near the office, so maybe he just doesn't have time for a leisurely meal. But he has to eat with clients for work, right? Well, when that happens, she told me that he goes to the bathroom after he eats and throws up. She said she saw a sore on his finger from throwing up so much."

Ryuto and I exchanged shocked glances.

Throwing up like that sounded a lot like an eating disorder. What did it mean if Amemiya and her uncle had the same affliction?

Saeko crinkled her beautifully shaped eyebrows.

"Also… I guess it was at the beginning of this year? He got a call from the hospital and got *really* worked up, just screaming at them: 'Run the tests again!' 'That's impossible!' Stuff like that. Mr. Kurosaki is usually pretty calm, and he's one of those people who doesn't show his emotions. But that day, he was howling. I heard it was incredible.

"That and you remember that day last month when it rained real hard? The gusts of wind were so strong that the trains stopped running, and it was a huge mess. That day, this secretary went to Mr. Kurosaki's office, and she told me he had his windows wide open and was staring outside. The rain and wind were blowing in, and the room was a disaster. He was soaked to the skin, but his eyes were flashing, and she said he was muttering 'There's no more time' and cursing. He was totally gone. I guess it must have been pretty terrifying. She thought he was going to jump out the window any second. She was so scared she couldn't call out to him. She panicked.

"Maybe he's sick. But it must be serious, like he doesn't know whether the day

ahead will be his last. Maybe before the police can arrest him, he'll cough up blood and keel over."

Saeko sounded like she was joking, but neither Ryuto nor I could laugh.

After we had thanked the girls and seen them out of the restaurant, Ryuto leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, looking grim.

"So the guy trailin' me was Hotaru's guardian, Kurosaki, right? Light hair, light sunglasses—his build and features all match up. When I went to Hotaru's house, it seemed totally deserted, and I got scared thinkin' she lived all alone in this massive house. I didn't even know she lived with her uncle until a couple days ago. Hotaru doesn't like to talk about it."

"Why would her uncle follow you around?"

Was he worried about her? If so, following someone around on all of her dates was going way too far. Was hiring mobsters to threaten Ryuto and hurting Amemiya's ex-boyfriends all his doing, too?

Amemiya's old friend Segawa had told us that ever since she'd started living with her uncle, Amemiya had stopped eating. And was it only coincidence that her aunt had been in an accident and died two weeks after her father?

Saeko's story about how her boss could be seriously ill was also troubling. If "there's no more time" meant what it seemed to, then we didn't know what he was going to try to do in the time he had left.

And then there was the matter of the mansion where Amemiya lived. Kurosaki had sold her old home, but there must have been a reason that he had another house ready. I could understand if they had started living in a condo since it was just the two of them, but according to Ryuto, the new house was pretty extravagant, too.

The more I thought about it, the more nervous I got, as if murky water were lapping at the edges of my mind.

"Still, I wonder who Kayano is."

Ryuto had knit his brows together and sunk into thought, but he looked up at that.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you. I found out when I checked into Hotaru’s family. Kayano Kujo was her mother. Kujo was her maiden name.”

There was no time.

As he pressed his face into the toilet and spit up the bitter stomach fluid, he groaned.

He threw up and threw up again, and it was not enough. He was seized by a desire to tear out everything inside his stomach and expel it, and he shoved his index finger into his mouth.

He pushed his finger deep into his throat, scraping his nail along the tender flesh he found there and digging at it.

His empty stomach convulsed, and he gagged, yellow fluid and saliva spilling from his mouth. He saw bright red blood mixed in with it, and violent rage and hatred crashed into his chest like a wave swelling in the darkness.

The end was coming, as though sand was pouring out of an hourglass.

He wanted more time.

He would give his position, his wealth, anything. Time—time was the only thing that was lacking.

An urge to vomit rose up in him again. His stomach rejected everything. How long would this go on, this hunger and pain that seemed to sear through his body? He was never free of the sound of falling sand—!

Beyond the door, he heard his secretary calling to him.

She feared the insanity she had seen. But still she tried to faithfully execute her duties. Her quavering voice told him that Dr. Sakata from the university was there to see him.

He shouted from inside the room.

“Send him away!”

Then he fell to his knees on the floor and hugged his head, spitting out curses.

Dammit—dammit… How could he ever forgive her? Dammit—traitor, whore, sow… I hope they all die.

Chapter 3 – When I Met You

I spent that Saturday at home relaxing.

“Konoha, Mommy baked some sweet potatoes, and she said come get you.”

It was late in the afternoon and quiet. I was reading a book at my desk during a break from studying when my little sister came toddling into my room.

“Okay, be right there.”

“What are you reading, Konoha?”

She stretched up under my arm to peek at the book, but she could only blink slowly at the sight of all the unfamiliar words.

“Nothing you would care about, Maika. I’ll give you a different book later.”

I closed the book, open to a page titled “Eating Disorders—Anorexia and Binging,” and put it away on a high shelf.

The book was called *Diseases of the Spirit.* I had read it at the end of middle school when I had shut myself up in my room, but back then I had been more interested in the topics like “panic disorders,” “hyperventilation syndrome,” and “obsessive-compulsive disorders.”

The spirit is linked to the body. If the spirit weakens, the body breaks down as well. I knew that from experience.

Amemiya’s spirit was refusing to eat—life’s most fundamental necessity. What had weakened it? How could it recuperate?

And then there was Kurosaki, who threw up whatever was in his stomach. It might not be his body that was damaged, but his spirit.

I had a very ominous image of Tamotsu Kurosaki, a man whom I had never met.

What was he trying to accomplish?

“I want a story with animals in it,” Maika said, beaming at me.

“Then we’ll have to find one as soon as we eat our snacks.”

“ ’Kay!” Maika agreed happily.

I took her hand, and we went downstairs. When I caught the scent of sweet potatoes, my stomach rumbled softly and my mouth watered.

I had a normal appetite now.

My spirit had been damaged once, but now it could function properly despite the occasional glitch.

The thing about my recovery that made my throat close up in pain and despair, though, was that it made me feel as if Miu’s presence was moving farther and farther away from me.

I knew I was being contradictory. Even though I usually throw a veil over my memories and try desperately not to look at them, I didn’t want to forget her.

After dinner, I rode my bike to a dollar store to buy more lead for my pencil. My mother had asked me to get some food and a few small items, and I was on my way home. But something was nagging at me, and I swung by the school.

It was probably the brief rain shower that had made the air so cool. Moonlight glinted where it struck the wet ground. The school building loomed pale in the humid darkness.

Tohko would never go so far as to stake out the mailbox on a Saturday—would she?

I wasn’t sure about that. I stood astride my bike and gazed at the school building.

Just then, a black luxury car stopped outside the gates.

The door opened and a willowy woman got out.

That’s—

My heart almost leaped out of my chest. I was positive it was Amemiya, carrying a black bag in one hand and wearing the old-fashioned sailor uniform.

She took fluttering steps into the building.

The car smoothly pulled away from the gate. I couldn't see the driver's face all that well in the darkness, but he looked like a tall, slender man.

Could it have been Kurosaki? But why would he bring Amemiya to school? Did he know about her eccentric behavior and leave her to it?

I pedaled hard to circle around to the back gate and park my bike at the bike racks; then I ran to the courtyard.

Amemiya was plunked down on the wet grass, writing in a notebook, then tearing up what she had written and putting it into the mailbox. Her frail back and twig of a neck were exactly as I had first seen them.

What should I do? Should I call out to her?

While I debated with myself, Amemiya put her notebook back into her bag, then stood up and walked off.

She did not go toward the gates, but instead headed down the walkway and went into the school building.

Huh? Shouldn't it have been locked? I wondered why it wasn't.

At this rate, I was going to lose track of Amemiya. I hurried after her.

Bathed in moonlight, the hallway was like a dark canal. Amemiya moved through it, bobbing like a gondola on the waves.

She climbed the stairs and moved down another hallway until she came to the chemistry lab. There she turned to the door and passed inside.

The lights snapped on in the room.

Pressed against the wall, swallowing nervously more times than I could count, I held my breath and listened. I heard a clattering and then a clang.

Was that… the sound of metal? A locker opening? And something being taken out of it? Then the sound of running water and a chair being moved…

Huh? Everything got quiet all of a sudden.

Worried, I opened the door a crack and peered inside, but Amemiya wasn't there.

Sweat coated my body instantly.

How could she—Where did she go? We were on the third floor. She couldn't have jumped out the window!

I opened the door and went into the room. The lights were on, and the windows and curtains were all closed. I caught the bitter smell of chemicals; there was a blackboard at the front of the room and shelves full of beakers and equipment at the back. In between were neat lines of black heat-resistant desks and chairs.

She wasn't there!

She couldn't be a real ghost…

Although I felt such fear that I was shaking, I started walking between the black desks.

Then I felt something warm against my shin.

My throat tensed and a scream slipped out. At the same moment, I heard a girl cry out at my feet.

Dropping my gaze, I saw a girl wearing an old-style sailor suit hunched on the ground.

"A-Amemiya!"

She hadn't disappeared. She held a rag in one hand and a spray bottle full of cleaner in the other, and she had pushed half her body under the desk to wipe off the wall behind it.

"Wh-what are you doing? Amemiya?" I asked, wide-eyed. I was so surprised that I forgot to explain my own presence.

She pursed her lips and glared at me.

"My name's not Amemiya. It's Kayano. Kayano Kujo. I already told you that, didn't I?"

Your mom's name, maybe. But now was not the time to argue.

"I'm sorry. What are you doing here this late on a Saturday, Kujo?"

"I was erasing my letters."

Amemiya—no, Kayano—turned back to look at the desk darkly. I could see a faint string of numbers that she had started to erase.

17-5-25-28-25-28-2-5-12-21-28-15-5-11

“I thought they’d all been erased. I thought they were all gone. But these were hidden by a desk, and they survived… I don’t need things like this anymore…”

She mumbled in a subdued voice, scrubbing at the numbers with her cloth.

“Why don’t you need them?”

“Because he and I are both dead now.”

“You don’t look like a ghost to me.”

Once she was done erasing the numbers, Kayano popped her head out from under the desk and grinned up at me, still on her hands and knees.

“Oh? You looked rather pale when you saw me before. Your legs were all wobbly because you thought I was a ghost, no?”

“Well, that was…”

I trailed off and she stood up, chuckling. It was an innocent, bright laugh unlike the morbid, shrieking peal I’d heard in the school yard. Her eyes were teasing as they surveyed me. They greatly resembled the eyes of a girl I kept in my heart who I missed.

Come on. I’ll know if you’re lying. Fess up, Konoha.

It pops right onto your face. But I like that you listen when I ask for stuff and that you don’t know how to lie.

I was seized by an uncanny feeling that I was seeing a vision of the past, and my chest constricted sweetly.

Miu had often teased me like this, too.

She had looked at me and laughed brilliantly.

Obviously, the girl before me wasn’t Miu. I would never see Miu again.

But I didn’t care if the vision was a delusion. I wanted to let these waves of nostalgia wash over me.

Even though it could never be real.

But what if…?

“So why are you leaving notes in the book club’s mailbox? What do those numbers mean? Who’s the guy you keep mentioning?”

Kayano put her cloth and bottle away in a locker with a clatter. She rummaged furtively with her white hands and then spoke in an ambiguous tone that revealed nothing of her true thoughts.

“If you want to know, then come here again tomorrow. Then I’ll at least give you a hint.”

The corners of her mouth curved in a slight smile, and she gazed at me invitingly, her eyes the color of strong tea.

I still felt disconnected and dreamy as I watched her leave the room.

Her fluttering steps.

The skirt of her uniform, rippling below her knees.

Did she just make me a promise?

The next day—Sunday—I spent the entire day thinking about Kayano.

Would she really be there tonight?

I kept thinking about it until night fell, and then I headed to the school, feeling uneasy. I went down the hall just as I had the day before, climbed the stairs, and went to the chemistry lab.

When I opened the door, Kayano was standing at the window, bathed in the moonlight. The lights were still off, but the curtains and windows were thrown open, filling the room with the cold silver light of the moon.

When she saw that I had come, Kayano smiled prettily.

“Hello, Konoha.”

Even the way she said my name reminded me of Miu.

A sweet voice, tickling at my ears.

She was not Miu. Even worse, she didn’t even belong to the world of the living

anymore, but still I couldn't stop my heart from trembling.

"You made a promise. Tell me. What do those numbers that you leave in our mailbox mean?"

"Now, now, I only said I would give you a hint."

"Then would you give it to me?"

Kayano spread out the hem of her skirt and sat down on one of the black desks.

"The hint is my name. K-a-y-a-n-o."

"I don't get it."

"Hee-hee. Think a little harder, detective."

"I'm just a high school student. I can't figure anything out from such a small clue. Can you give me another hint?"

"In that case, I'll tell you about him," she whispered, a tender warmth flickering to life in her eyes as she looked at me. "He was closer to me than anyone. He was a part of my soul and my other half. Everywhere we went and everything we did, it was together…"

The pristine moonlight shining through the window carried with it memories of the distant past.

The fragments of time became white feathers, which fluttered slowly down around me with the light of the moon.

It had been the same for us…

Wherever we went, whatever we did, it was together. Miu had been the other half of my soul. Or at least that's how I had felt about her.

"He and I had a lot of fun together. But"—Kayano's lashes drooped sadly—"he got angry at me and went away. We never saw each other again."

I pressed down on my chest as pain seared through my heart.

I would never see her again, either.

Miu had rejected me, her eyes filled with such loathing.

I had loved her so much, but I would never see her again…

“Say, Konoha—do you know how you can get back the things you’ve lost?” Kayano asked soberly, looking straight at me.

I bunched the front of my shirt in my fist and answered, my voice shaking, “That’s impossible. You can’t get something back once it’s gone.”

Kayano lowered her eyes ever so slightly and declared with perfect detachment, “No, it’s actually very easy. You just have to reverse time. Then you won’t make the same mistakes you did before.”

It was like a devil was whispering in my ear.

If I could reverse time… if I could go back to that day…

How often had I wished to do exactly that during that interminable winter I spent in bed, the covers pulled over my head?

If I could go back to how things were before I wrote the novel, could go back to that day Miu threw herself off the roof…

Please, God—grant me this wish. Please let me go back.

I didn’t need anything else as long as I didn’t have to lose Miu.

Please, God.

But time didn’t reverse itself.

I was here alone.

“That’s impossible. Nobody can go back in time.”

Kayano saw how badly I shook, and her face suddenly saddened. She murmured very quietly, “I see… so you’ve wanted to go back before, too.”

She slid off the desk and walked toward me. She reached out both arms and gently wrapped them around my head, pulling me to her frail chest.

I had no idea what emotions inspired that act.

She only seemed to be very sad, and she was trembling a little. Her thin body was as cool as snow and had a clean scent I’d smelled somewhere before.

I relinquished myself to the phantom embrace, feeling a faint relief and also a

deep ache.

I wouldn't have minded if time had frozen forever in that moment.

But after a little while, Kayano pulled away from me and whispered, "I have to go. Someone is waiting for me."

I watched her walk out to the hallway and finally came back to my senses. I still hadn't said anything. I didn't want to let her go.

"W-wait—uh, do… do you want to g-get something to eat?"

Ugh, what an awful line. Couldn't I think of anything more original?

Kayano turned around.

"I can't… I only eat the things that *he* brings me."

Her tone kept me at a distance, starkly different from a moment ago when she had embraced me, and she left.

"I wonder if it's possible to turn back time," she whispered.

It is utterly impossible. It is the act of a demon rebelling against God, but he tried to achieve it. He made a pact with the devil and took her back from the grave. He made the impossible possible, and now she was with him.

She danced madly through the world of darkness, illuminated by the moon.

"She is me and I am her." She said this as if singing a song, every day becoming more like that other girl. With each day, the presence of the other girl grew stronger inside her and the original girl disappeared. The girl who was not her laughed and sang—and loved—with her body and her voice.

The girl who reached her arms out to him, the girl who whispered to him.

She appealed to the girl inside her in heartbreaking tones.

"Please, don't touch him again. Don't smile at him. Don't pursue him.

"Because I hate him so much I want to kill him."

When the week began on Monday, Tohko stormed into my classroom first thing in the morning.

“Konoha! How could you stand me up like that on Friday after I reminded you!”

I’d been expecting her visit, but I hadn’t thought she would launch her attack so early in the morning, so I completely missed my chance to get away.

“Umm… my chronic hiccups suddenly came back, so I had to go to the hospital.”

“I never heard of you having this condition before! I made three trips to the library while I was waiting for you! I finished a collection of O. Henry short stories, Ryunosuke Akutagawa short stories, and a collection of Shin’ichi Hoshi’s ultrashort stories.”

“Why did you only read short stories?”

“I picked them on purpose, so I could stop as soon as you got there. But you never came, and 1-800-FL—WERS brought me a huge bouquet of black lilies, and when I got back from the library, there was a big piece of paper taped to the wall of our room that said ‘I’m back’ in red letters, and look—”

Tohko shoved a note at me. She must have taken it out of the mailbox that morning.

“Today’s note is more stepped up than before. It even has splatters of blood on it!”

Red splotches were strewn vividly across the yellowed paper, and the brushstrokes read, “a bird of bad omen,” “painting the walls with his blood,” “its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons.” I felt a little dizzy.

“And then there’s this, look.”

There was a string of numbers on the torn strips of ruled paper.

9-10-17-15-28-17-13-17-15

23-5-28-17-13-17-15

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4

I wondered what those numbers really meant. She’d said her name was the clue, but…

Looking down at the note, I thought back to what had happened over the weekend, and I felt someone's eyes on my face.

When I looked up, Kotobuki was glaring at me, her bag still slung over her shoulder.

Our eyes met accidentally, so I had to try and smile. Her eyes went wide, and she curtly turned her face away in a fluster.

Geez, why does she hate me so much?

"Hey, Konoha, what are you smiling and sighing about? What are you looking at?"

Tohko pinched my nose between her thumb and forefinger.

Luckily the bell saved me by ringing right then.

"Arggggh. I'll be back at lunch! You can't run away, okay?"

She turned around several times to remind me and then left.

"I'm sorry, Tohko."

Apologizing under my breath, I quickly retreated to the library when lunch started.

She had once told me, "It's so awful going to the library when I'm hungry. I see all those treats lined up in front of me, and all I can do is look at them." So I had actually expected to be safe there, but then I saw Kotobuki sitting behind the counter and wished I could escape.

How unlucky can I get today?

She noticed me, too; then she frowned deeply and gave me a black look.

The room was air-conditioned, but it suddenly became very hot. I wiped away the nervous sweat that had broken out on my face and hurried past the counter with a vague greeting. It was like being watched by a cobra.

Kotobuki's eyebrows hiked up sharply.

Before she could accost me, I quickly shuffled off to the reading room.

While I was searching for a seat, I spotted someone unexpected at the

window.

Kayano? No, that's Amemiya…

She was paging through a slim hardcover. Her pale face was bent over the book as still and quiet as a lake in winter.

Breathing as quietly as I could, I approached her.

"Amemiya?"

She jumped and looked up at me. The pages of the book slipped out of her fingers, and I caught sight of tiny numbers written over every inch on the back of the cover.

Amemiya hurriedly closed the book and shrunk back as if afraid.

Her timid eyes proved that she was Amemiya, not Kayano. She was so bashful. I felt bad for startling her. I smiled at her pleasantly without mentioning what I'd just seen.

"Hello. Do you remember me?"

She hugged the book tightly to her chest and nodded.

"You're… Inoue, right? Thank you again for what you did…"

Does she not remember the things that happen when she's Kayano? Or did she just pretend not to know? Unable to form a judgment about that, I went on serenely.

"I'm glad you remember me. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"… Okay."

"Thanks."

I slid into the seat next to hers. When I'd seen Kayano in the chemistry lab, I'd been too dazzled by the peculiar situation to notice, but seeing her like this I realized that she had gotten even thinner since Tohko and I had carried her to the nurse's office. Her skin had gone past pale and was now ashen, and the veins in her arms were visible. Her fingers looked like they would snap if she tried to hold up her book.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you. What are you reading?"

"*The Day Boy and the Night Girl* by George MacDonald."

"Oh, he writes children's fantasy novels, right? I've read *At the Back of the North Wind.*"

That was a lie. I'd watched Tohko joyously devour it and talk all about it, but I only remembered the title.

"What's your book about?"

Amemiya looked down.

"… It's about a girl who's been shut away in a mountain since she was little by an evil witch… who knows nothing but darkness… who meets a boy… who knows nothing but light."

"Wow, that sounds interesting. Maybe I should read it, too."

Maybe I would be able to get a look at the numbers on the inside cover.

But Amemiya's thin shoulders trembled and I saw her tighten her grip on the book, so I gave up on pursuing it any further.

I pulled back nonchalantly and continued in a light, conversational tone.

"I love fantasy novels. Stuff like *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Neverending Story.* Stories about adventures in other worlds have so much imagination. It's exciting."

"… Yes."

Amemiya's lips moved sluggishly.

"I wish I could go to some other world… like the girl in this book… I wish I could go to the world of light…"

Her voice was empty, sad, with the despair of resignation in her every word. She sounded as if she was talking to herself.

Her demeanor was such a contrast to Kayano's, so meek it pierced my heart. I gazed at Amemiya's pale cheek and downcast face.

"Um… is anything bothering you, Amemiya? You can tell me about it if you want to."

She raised her lowered lashes ever so slightly and looked at me.

Her eyes weren't vacant as they had always been before now; the moment our eyes met, hers brimmed with a depth and melancholy that threatened to suck me in.

"You're a good person, Inoue. You… shouldn't get too involved with me."

"Amemiya—"

She stood up quietly, and the book still hugged to her chest and her head still down, she walked away.

Her words—*I wish I could go to the world of light*—echoed again and again in my ears.

That book she'd been reading… It had looked pretty old and its cover was faded. And the tiny numbers written densely on the inside cover… What could they be?

On Saturday night, Kayano had been wiping numbers off the wall in the chemistry lab. I was sure those numbers held some critical meaning.

The hint is my name. K-a-y-a-n-o.

Could Amemiya read those numbers, too?

Why did Amemiya turn into Kayano?

What had made her start doing that?

Before she'd started living with Kurosaki, Amemiya had been a perfectly ordinary girl who ate and talked with her friends during lunch.

Why had she become *unable* to eat?

Was it related to Kurosaki after all? Was he the evil witch who had sealed her away in the world of darkness?

… I can't. I only eat the things that he *brings me.*

What Kayano had said bothered me, too.

And why should I not get involved with Amemiya?

"Ugh, I don't get it at all."

I leaned my elbows on the desk and clutched my head.

At first I'd only meant to act as Ryuto's assistant, but now I was utterly engrossed by the mystery of Kayano and Hotaru.

I knew it was because of what Kayano had said to me in the chemistry lab.

Say, Konoha—do you know how you can get back the things you've lost?

She had said it was easy. That all I had to do was reverse time.

Even though that was actually impossible.

Did Kayano also have a reason to wish that time would flow backward? Had her wish been granted? If so, then why was she still wandering every night?

There was no point to this. No matter how much I thought these questions over, I was going around in circles, which only added to the crushing weight on my chest.

The end of lunch was approaching, so I got up.

As I passed the counter, I felt a bolt of murderous rage and turned. Kotobuki's lips were tightly pinched, and she glared at me.

"I saw that."

Her accusatory whisper stopped me cold.

I reeled. *Wh-what?* What did she think she saw? What was she so angry about?

"You're *evil.*"

Huh?

What was she babbling about? Why was I evil and why was she attacking me? Kotobuki bit down on her lip and looked away in a totally different direction; then she left the counter. Stupefied, I watched her go.

I have no idea, Kotobuki.

On her sixteenth birthday, she met someone she had not seen for a long time.

Someone kind who had showered her unstintingly with love when she had been living in paradise. That person gave her an old book.

Written inside it were secret words.

Cursed words that stole from her the future that she had dreamed of maybe someday, and cast her even deeper into the depths of comfortless night.

There was no hope for salvation. She could not allow herself to hope for it. Sin encrusted her.

Alone in the classroom, gazing at a world that melted into the darkness that spread over it like black ink, she whispered, "I wish that I could open the door and go to some other world. There, I could live a completely different story than this one."

If she could have met the day boy, she might have been able to go back to that warm place from her past.

"Konoha!"

Tohko appeared so suddenly that I almost fell over in terror. She had a sulky look on her face and a mop in her hands.

It was cleanup time after classes. I had gone out to the balcony to wipe the windows with a cloth.

"What are you doing in my class? And why do you have that mop?" I asked, terrified. Tohko shoved the window open with one hand, her face the very picture of rage.

"I snuck out in the middle of cleanup because you keep running away from me, Konoha. Why were you picking up girls in the library during lunch?"

"What are you talking about?"

My eyes popped. Did she mean when I was talking to Amemiya? I couldn't think of anything but that. But how did Tohko find out about that?

"Don't pretend like you don't know. Nanase told me."

"What?!"

Kotobuki appeared next to Tohko, her arms crossed and lips pursed.

“I’m sure of it, Tohko. I saw Inoue with my own eyes. I *ab-so-lutely* saw him chatting up a girl with a smarmy smile on his face.”

Whoa—Kotobuki had told on me to Tohko? But *why*? And when did they start calling each other by their first names?

“That’s not all. Inoue has gone off surrounded by girls before, too.”

“Oh, is that so? So while I’ve been worrying about the future of the book club and waiting around for him, Konoha has been prancing off on dates with girls. That’s the kind of boy Konoha is. It doesn’t hurt him even a tiny bit if the book club gets attacked by a herd of pigs or if the walls get painted in blood.”

I interjected quickly.

“Hold on, you’re making way too many leaps here! Please step out of your fantasy. You’re wrong anyway. I wasn’t fooling around or going on dates.”

“Then what were you doing?”

Tohko’s frown deepened even further, and she looked at me petulantly.

“W-well…”

“The fact that he’s stuttering proves that he has a guilty conscience, Tohko.”

“Hey!”

“You’re right, Nanase.”

I couldn’t bear their combined recrimination, so I decided to run.

“Sorry, I… have something I need to go do.”

I shoved the cloth into Kotobuki’s hands and ran into the classroom, grabbed my book bag from its hook on the side of my desk, and burst out into the hall.

“Hey! Konoha!”

“Coward!”

I heard their accusatory shouts behind me, but I turned tail and ran.

I didn’t care how much Kotobuki disliked me, there was no excuse for her to go out of her way to rat me out to Tohko. *Man, I bet Tohko’s furious.*

I was waiting for Ryuto in our usual restaurant, feeling depressed, when he walked in escorting a plump little woman in her seventies. Ryuto held the door open for her, and she looked so thrilled and embarrassed that I felt a spasm of horror.

He couldn't have picked *her* up, too!

My eyes were bugging out as Ryuto introduced the woman glibly.

" 'Sup, Konoha. This is Yoshie Wada. She used to be the ultrahousekeeper at Hotaru's place."

She could not fight it any longer.

That was why she wrote the letters.

To him and to the other girl and to whatever grand being controlled people's destinies.

She wrote the secret letters down in a notebook, then tore them up and dropped them into the mailbox.

Please understand how I feel.

Hear my voice.

Grant this wish.

I'm scared

it hurts

a ghost

stay away

25-27-3-28-4-5-10-28-25-4-28-2-5-12-21

22-5-8-23-25-12-21-28-3-21-28-22-17-10-24-21-8

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4

When I opened the door to the chemistry lab, Kayano was sitting at one of the desks, staring out the window at the scenery, which was sinking into shadow.

Her downcast eyes looked desolate and made me think of how Amemiya had looked when I'd seen her in the library at lunchtime.

"I saw someone you know today."

She turned when I spoke and gazed at me tranquilly.

"I heard a lot about *you two* from your housekeeper, Ms. Wada."

Yoshie Wada, whom Ryuto kindly introduced to me, had been a longtime housekeeper at the Amemiya household. She had been working at the mansion since Amemiya's father was a child.

"I see… I suppose she didn't have anything good to say about me," Kayano said disinterestedly. "That I left all the work to her or that I was never home… that I was willful and selfish, that I would throw tantrums all the time, or that I would break dishes on the floor and scream at people… You don't have to say a word. I know. The servants often whispered that 'the missus is in another stormy mood.' Takashi was a gentleman and kind, and his younger sister Reiko was adorable and proper, and they were both very nice to me. The house was magnificent as well and the food delicious. It was like being in heaven… I shouldn't have had any reason to be unhappy. So why, I wonder, did I feel the need to kick up such tempests?"

Takashi was Kayano's husband, and Reiko was his younger sister. They were Amemiya's father and aunt respectively.

Ms. Wada had told us that her master's heart was a little weak, but that he was a kind, placid man. He fell so deeply in love that he practically worshipped the ground on which his wife walked, and he cherished his daughter Hotaru as well.

"And Hotaru was the only one to whom the missus would not raise her voice. She would often take Hotaru with her to visit her own family estate. Although the missus's parents died quite early on, so there was no one living there. The master would grumble about how dangerous it was for two women to stay at the house alone.

"She must have been very attached to the home she had grown up in. Before her illness took her, she whined that she wanted to go home. It caused the

master a good deal of consternation.”

When we’d asked what had become of that estate now, Ms. Wada had lowered her voice as if speaking of something cursed.

“Mr. Kurosaki and Hotaru are living at the missus’s home now.

“After the missus died, the house was completely remodeled and rented out. Mr. Kurosaki drove the tenants out and began living there himself, though it must be inconvenient for the two of them to live in such a large mansion on top of a hill. I wonder what he intends.”

Ms. Wada frowned disapprovingly.

I had my own questions. Like why Kurosaki had sold the house Amemiya was living in and deliberately moved them to such a big house, which was Kayano’s old home. Could that be an accident?

“I have never trusted Mr. Kurosaki. Ever since Miss Reiko brought that man to the house, I had a bad feeling about him. Of course, he acted the part of the upstanding gentleman, but his table manners were a bit strange. When eating pork sauté, he would simply bite into the lemon provided rather than squeeze it over the meat and then lick his fingers clean. You would never mistake him for a gentleman who had been raised in a proper household.

“He wore lightly tinted sunglasses, I suppose, because his eyes were bad. But from time to time, you know, I caught the gaze he hid behind those sunglasses, and it would send a chill down my spine. You might say that though he smiled with his lips, his eyes never smiled. Like a hungry wolf lying in wait for his prey… That was the sort of ominous feel his eyes gave you.

“The master was dead set against her marriage to Mr. Kurosaki. But Miss Reiko was utterly infatuated with him. She went so far as to say that she would elope if the master wouldn’t give his blessing, so he was forced to acknowledge them. And as a result, all those awful things…

“It’s very sad… That man has seized all of Hotaru’s property and taken her away from her family, who ought to have been there to protect her, and she’s been left all by herself.”

“Wada was very fond of Hotaru. She took care of her as if she were her own

granddaughter. And she continued to do so *even after I died,*" Kayano murmured, her gaze dropping to her feet.

"That's how it sounded. Ms. Wada was worried about Amemiya. Last year, she saw Amemiya for her sixteenth birthday, and she said that Amemiya had gotten so skinny and as unresponsive as a doll."

Kayano listened in silence.

"But she told us that she gave Amemiya something she had received from you."

"It was wrapped so I don't know what was inside, but it was a box about this big."

Ms. Wada indicated a box about the size of a college notebook.

"Before the missus passed, she asked me to give it to Hotaru on her sixteenth birthday. I had kept it all that time."

"What was it that you gave her?"

Kayano's thin shoulders trembled, as if she was struggling with something, and she circled her arms around herself, hugging her body tightly.

"That's… secret." Her voice shook uncharacteristically. "I can't tell anyone that."

The way she was carrying herself, her expression, her slender fingers, her white legs—it all seemed so ephemeral, as if she would disappear at any moment… I called out to her without thinking, "Amemiya?"

She started and looked up. Then she smiled at me with Kayano's face.

A proud, arrogant smile.

"No. I am Kayano. After all, Hotaru doesn't matter to anyone. But that's not important anymore. Hotaru and Kayano will both disappear very soon…"

"What do you mean?"

Her face looked suddenly sad again; then she dropped her feet heavily to the floor and murmured, "*We are finally leaving the world of the living behind.* If half of your soul has committed a sin and been cast into hell, isn't that the duty

of the half that's left behind? It would be wrong for only one part to be saved and go to heaven."

I had no idea what she meant. Everything she'd told me tumbled through my mind, confusing me terribly.

I needed to walk up to her and ask my questions this time.

What's making you suffer? What is it you truly hope for? Why did you pray to go back to the past? Why did Hotaru Amemiya have to become Kayano Kujo?

Who is your "he"?

But my mouth and feet were both paralyzed. *Now—I have to ask now. I may never see her again. Why am I hesitating?!*

Her soft, chestnut-colored hair billowed around her as she passed by me.

That same smell tickled my nostrils again—a clean scent that filled me with dread, which I had smelled somewhere before.

Unable to speak, I stood rooted to the spot, watching a phantom go by.

Chapter 4 – Spirit from the Past

On the first day of midterms, I overslept.

I had been thinking back over everything that happened in the chemistry lab the night before and hadn't taken any time to study.

I woke up at my desk, and when I looked at my clock, I saw it was morning.

Gasping, I ran into my classroom. I asked Akutagawa if he had seen Tohko yet.

"She left that for you," he said and pointed at my desk.

It was a paperback copy of Sōseki Natsume's *I Am a Cat*.

I flipped cautiously through it and found a violet bookmark. Tohko had written on it in big letters in Magic Marker: "You stink!"

I was staggered by this bald-faced insult that was utterly devoid of vocabulary or grace. It was so unlike a book girl.

Geez, what a childish thing to do. She must be pretty mad…

Kotobuki was glaring at me like always, too. Nothing but headaches.

After a crushing defeat on my exam, school was out for the day. Ryuto was drinking a soda at our usual restaurant. He brushed aside my anxiety. "Don't sweat it. Tohko's real easy. Just leave her alone for two or three days, and she'll get over it."

"No, I know she's totally pigheaded. She's going to hold this grudge for a long time, just like Anne of Green Gables swore she would never talk to Gilbert again."

"Wow, you know Tohko pretty well, huh?"

He grinned slyly, as if this wasn't actually a huge problem for me, and suddenly

something clicked.

“You know, this is all your fault in the first place. I’ve been wondering for a while now. Why did you get me involved in this?”

“Just ’cause you and Hotaru go to the same school.”

I glared at him as he dodged the question.

“That can’t be the only reason. I’ve watched you the last couple of days, and I can tell. You get things done, and you can butter people up, and you’re smart. You would be perfect as the lead character in a detective novel—unlike me. You don’t need help from a guy like me. So why did you drag me into this? You didn’t just want a bumbling Watson around because the detective’s brilliance stands out too much, did you?”

Ryuto shrugged and gave a rueful smile.

“I’m not such an awful guy. I just wanted to find out what Tohko’s author was like.”

My cheeks flared with heat. Did he just call me Tohko’s author? What was he saying?

“And what does that mean?” I shot back to hide how much I was reeling.

Ryuto rested his chin in his hand and looked me right in the eye.

“Exactly what I said. I wanted to find out about you. When Tohko told you to stay out of it, I realized you were the Konoha she was always talking about. She’d mentioned all sorts of stuff before that, so I had been wondering about you, but when I saw you, I started to wonder even more. So I went to your school to meet you. I asked for your help with Hotaru because I needed an excuse to talk to you.”

“This sounds like a pickup line. You don’t like boys, do you?”

A carefree, childlike smile came over his masculine face.

“Nope. I love girls too much.”

“I’m just Tohko’s errand boy in charge of snacks. She eats the improv stories I write and then gripes about how it’s too watery or there’s not enough salt or the

organization is jumbled and there's no mellowness. And just recently she was sobbing about how spicy something was and that she had to eat some Joan Aiken stories to get rid of the taste. And anyway, I'm not an author."

Miu's spiteful eyes cut into my mind and filled it, digging her talons into my heart.

I gritted my teeth against the sharp pain that shot through me.

No—!

I don't want to feel that way anymore! An author is the last thing I would ever want to be!

"Well, whatever. Let's leave that to wrap up later. I haven't read anything you've written yet anyway," Ryuto said meaningfully and then sucked at the straw in his soda.

I took small, deep breaths and calmed myself down. I took the notes Tohko had left out of my bag and arranged them on the table.

"… Let's get back on track. These are the notes we found in our mailbox. There were some with blood spatters or burn marks, too, but I don't think Amemiya wrote those, so I didn't bring them."

Ryuto looked at the scraps of paper—"hate you," "a ghost," "help"—and frowned. He picked up each note in his thick fingers and peered closely at it. When he saw the note that said "4-5," his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"What are these numbers?"

"I don't know. Though Tohko says they mean 'death (4) finds you (5)."

"That's… pleasant." Ryuto smirked. "Well, why don't we just ask Hotaru?"

"What?"

I gaped. Ryuto looked up at someone and his eyes crinkled in a smile. "Hey there, Hotaru."

I looked over in surprise and saw Amemiya standing in the restaurant, looking confused.

Ryuto went over and put an arm around her shoulders, then brought her back.

She was thus forced to sit next to him.

“Why are… you here, Inoue?” Amemiya asked in a soft whisper, looking at my face.

I hadn’t told Ryuto about how I had seen Kayano in the chemistry lab or how I had talked to Amemiya in the library. I had no idea how I should react.

Ryuto answered flippantly, a smile carved into his face as he spoke.

“We’re best buds. Right, Konoha?”

“… I met Ryuto a couple days ago. Sorry I didn’t tell you. I wasn’t trying to hide it. There just wasn’t a good time to mention it.”

Amemiya looked down.

“Anyway, order something, Hotaru.”

“… I’m sorry, I just ate.”

“I doubt that. Today I swear I’m gonna get you to eat somethin’. Harumi? I need a chicken salad, corn soup, and French toast.”

As Ryuto gave his order to the waitress he knew, Amemiya folded her thin hands in her lap, knit her eyebrows, and shrank in on herself with a morose look on her face.

“Hotaru? Were you the one who left these notes in the book club’s mailbox?”

Ryuto showed her the note that said “help,” and Amemiya raised her head slightly. Tears filled her eyes, and she looked back down.

“I… don’t know who did that.”

“When you say it like that, I can’t really believe you. You wrote these. You heard about the mailbox from me and went to find it, didn’t you? And you leave these notes every night. Why would you do somethin’ like that? Did you want someone to listen to you? Did you want someone to help you? You could have just told me. I’ll help you. What is it that’s botherin’ you? When we first met that night in the storm, you were wearin’ an old sailor suit and ridin’ the swings… Why were you doin’ that?”

Ryuto peppered her with questions.

“Is it connected to your guardian somehow?”

Amemiya shuddered, but she kept her head down. My heart ached to see her bite down on her bottom lip so hard.

“Maybe I should go,” I offered quietly, but she shook her head.

“No… you stay, Inoue. I’m… going home.”

Then she looked at Ryuto with her beautiful eyes brimming with deep sadness.

“Thank you for being with me all this time, Ryu. I came here today to tell you I want to break up. I think this should be the last time we see each other.”

Ryuto’s eyes widened, and he threw himself at Amemiya in a panic.

“What are you talkin’ about?! Why all of a sudden? Did your guardian say somethin’ to you? That guy in the sunglasses who followed me around was your uncle, wasn’t he? And wasn’t he the one who had those punks attack me? It was, wasn’t it? Hotaru?”

Amemiya answered in a thin whisper, “You haven’t left me… like all the other boys I’ve dated. So it would be bad… if we kept going.”

“What do you mean?”

“… I’m sorry.”

Amemiya picked up her bag and stood, just as the food arrived. Ryuto grabbed Amemiya’s arm and pulled her back into her chair.

“Eat. If you eat the whole thing, maybe I’ll think about breakin’ up.”

His face was wild, filled with naked rage. Amemiya looked back at him with tears in her eyes, but finally she hung her head and picked up a spoon.

As soon as she dipped the silver spoon into the creamy yellow soup, Amemiya’s grip on the spoon tightened. She probably would have dropped it otherwise.

She seemed to waver at that point, but apparently resolved, she ladled up some soup and brought it to her mouth.

Something strange happened then: Amemiya covered her mouth with her hand, as if she’d just swallowed poison, and she fell out of her chair and onto her knees on the floor.

The spoon made a cold sound as it fell from her hand and struck the floor.

Amemiya pressed her hands over her mouth; her eyes widened and her body convulsed.

“Hotaru, are you—?”

Ryuto knelt on the floor beside her and put his arms around her.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

Shaking her head, Amemiya assured him that she was fine. She glanced toward one corner of the restaurant, and her eyes grew wider again.

Terror was written clearly on her face.

Amemiya shoved Ryuto away powerfully and grabbed her bag.

“I’m sorry. I have to go. I’m sorry, I really am,” she murmured repeatedly, her face ashen, and she ran toward the door.

Ryuto chased after her. I got up and followed them, too.

Before she could get out of the restaurant, Ryuto caught her shoulder.

“Are you angry that I tried to force you to eat? I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have. I’ll walk you home. You don’t look too good.”

“No!” Amemiya shrieked, throwing Ryuto off. She looked desperate to get away from us and escape the restaurant as soon as she possibly could.

“You can’t ever talk to me again. Good-bye.”

With that, Amemiya ran out the door.

“Dammit…”

When we got back to our table, Ryuto hugged his head and fell across the table.

“Looks like I messed up, Konoha. I didn’t mean to back her into a corner like that.”

The sight of Ryuto in such low spirits made me realize that he really was a boy in high school, despite how much bigger he was than me.

He may have been a smart aleck and a hit with women and decisive and

someone who got things done, like the butt-kicking hero of a detective novel, but there were some things that even he couldn't do, and even he could get depressed.

I felt closer to him than I had before.

"Cheer up, Ryuto. I think you showed Amemiya that you're honestly worried about her. I'll try talking to her tomorrow at school."

"Thanks."

Still, Ryuto kept his face buried against the table for a while.

I couldn't get my mind off the terror Amemiya had shown just before she shoved Ryuto.

What had she seen? It was definitely over there somewhere…

I remembered where she had been looking and glanced subtly in that direction.

There was a potted plant and behind it a table. There was a coffee cup on the table, but the seat was empty.

Just as I started to convince myself that there was nothing odd about any of that, I realized steam was rising up from the coffee cup.

There was still coffee in it, and it was fresh.

I looked more closely.

There were no bags on the table or the chair.

The person who sat at that table had left without ever touching the coffee, which was still warm.

"Let's make the rules," he said.

"From now on, you can't eat anything unless I give it to you."

The first day, she took her lunch at school. She had not been given breakfast, so her stomach ached with hunger and she was drooling. It was only to be expected. And it would have been too embarrassing for her to be the only person not eating lunch.

He punished her, locking her in a basement room, and did not give her food for three days.

Shut inside the room, she crouched down, hugging her empty stomach, desperately fighting back the thirst and hunger clawing at the walls of her stomach. She licked the water that dropped from the toilet, stretching out her life.

The morning of the fourth day, he opened the door and brought her food. He fed her with his own hand a sweet vegetable soup and soft bread with chestnuts in it.

Next, when she ate three bites of stew and half of a buttered roll at school, he told her the punishment and did not open the door to the basement room for three days.

She was only half-conscious due to her hunger, and in the dim darkness she saw phantoms of the dead and heard voices weeping vengefully.

He killed us.

He came for revenge.

He is a demon.

She pitched forward onto the floor, and he lifted her limp body in his arms and fed her rice porridge flavored with seven herbs and whitefish and sweet stewed apples and oranges from a silver spoon.

He would not forgive her for even taking one bite of a cookie.

He alluded to her eating the food her friend had given her with a detached, quiet voice, and as she begged for his forgiveness, he took her arm and brought her to the basement room and locked the door.

She spent five days there.

Her throat, rough with thirst, cramped up feverishly, and her stomach was in such violent pain that she felt as if a giant hand were kneading it beneath its knuckles. Her ears roared and she heard things that were not there, and ghostly white lights flitted eerily around the room. She could summon no more tears.

I'm sorry. I will never eat anything unless you give it to me.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I won't ever eat again. I promise. I'm sorry.

"That's right. You must not eat."

He alone in all the world would be the one to fill her empty stomach.

She always felt his gaze upon her.

In the hallway, in the classroom, in the school yard, in the stairwell, he was watching her.

Countless images of his face covered the wall, his eyes burning with pale fire—his eyes filled with hatred—accusing her.

She must not eat. He said she must not eat.

On the bustling streets of the city, in the bright sunlight of the park, at a movie theater filled with couples, whenever she turned around, he was standing there. Everyone she passed became him: the families playing in the park, the couple sitting on a bench talking, the actors projected onto the screen of the movie theater. All of them transformed to wear his face.

His face when he removed his lightly tinted sunglasses and stared at her.

His gaze flickering with fiery hatred and cold insanity like ghostly lights.

He was watching. He was looking at her. He was looking straight at her. He was watching. He kept staring. He was watching. Watching. Watching.

The next morning, I went to see Amemiya, but she was out sick.

I had to give up and go back to my class. When I did, I saw Tohko and Kotobuki in the hall, their heads bent together, whispering.

"All right. I'll see you after school."

"Thanks, Nanase. That makes me feel better."

"It's no problem. I'm happy I can help you, Tohko. Oh!"

Kotobuki noticed me and glared, pursing her lips. Tohko turned and looked at me, too.

I gave them a smile anyway. It would have been nice if Tohko's mood had improved, but that wish was more naively self-serving than the ultranaive Harlequin romance featuring Arab princes that Tohko had forced me to read on her recommendation.

She placed the index finger of one hand beneath her eye and stuck out her bright pink tongue, razzing me.

Then she turned back to Kotobuki and said, "See you after school, Nanase," before walking off, her long braids flying.

I was reeling from the shock of being razzed by a girl in the hallway—wasn't this supposed to be *high school*?—but I pushed it down and turned a smile on Kotobuki.

"What are you and Tohko doing after school?"

She turned away coldly, too, and in her harshest possible voice replied, "I'm not telling *you.* Really, it's none of your business."

Then she went into the classroom.

God, that was going to bug me! What were they planning on doing after school?!

By the time we finished cleaning and I looked around the room, Kotobuki was already gone.

"Hey, do you know where Kotobuki went?"

I tried asking some of her friends, but all I got in return was conjecture.

"Dunno. I don't think there are any library shifts during exams, though."

"She flew out of here. Maybe she has a date? Nanase is pretty popular."

Just in case, I went up to check the club room. It was empty, just as I'd expected, but notes were scattered across the tea-colored table. Notes that were torn from college-ruled paper, notes that were suspiciously yellowed, as if they'd been brought back from the past, notes with burn marks, notes with spatters of blood—

Beside the pile of notes were black lilies arranged in a large beaker, old student

rosters, anthologies of student essays, school newspapers, and a packet of tissues with the name of a seedy-looking store on it.

The student rosters, anthologies, and school newspapers were all from the two years that Kayano had been enrolled at the school. Tohko had probably been scouring them for the name Kayano Kujo, which Amemiya had called herself in the school yard that night.

A sheet of paper rested atop the student rosters, and I saw that a message had been written on it in Magic Marker.

> You're dead to me, Konoha. I'm doing this on my own now. *By* Tohko.

My eyes bugged out.

So she was still superangry. I guess it was wrong of me to skip out on her so many times without saying anything, however good my reasons had been.

I got the novel that Tohko had left me the day before out of my bag and set it on the desk.

Then, in a corner of the paper disowning me, I wrote a small "I'm sorry" in pencil.

I hoped she would feel better when she saw it… But how many years had Anne ignored Gilbert?

In the end, I still had no idea where Tohko and Kotobuki had gone, so I resigned myself to visiting the person who seemed to know everything.

"My, my. Isn't this the first time you've come to see me all by yourself?"

Maki stood at a canvas in her workroom, but she stopped painting when I came in and grinned.

"Did Tohko leave you behind?"

I didn't like the fact that she seemed to already know everything.

A lot of people in the school called her "princess," but it wasn't just because of her pedigree or her vast personal network. The girl was impressive and not easy to outmaneuver.

I pasted a bright, sociable smile on my face.

“Since you already know that, maybe you can tell me. You must have given Tohko some information. I know she was investigating Kayano Kujo. What has my president dragged one of my classmates into?”

Maki asked me a question in response, apparently enjoying herself. “And what will you give me if I tell you? As you’ve surmised, I gave Tohko some information, but *she’s* already compensated me for it.”

C-compensation? She couldn’t mean… I gulped.

“Did you draw her nude?!”

My eyes raced unintentionally to the canvas. It was a landscape painting that showed a dark vista loaded with blacks and blues. Was it a foreign country? It showed a desolate hill at night, its trees and grass bending in the wind. I scanned the picture from one end to the other and didn’t see anything that looked remotely like Tohko’s nude image.

“Wouldn’t you like to know? But yes, I’ll just say that it was worth seeing,” Maki said, baiting me. “Well, Konoha? Would you get naked for me, too? I would draw you a lovely picture. Wouldn’t you like a memento of your youth?”

“I think I’ll pass on the nude painting. But if you tell me where Tohko went, I won’t tell her what you did to her.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

Maki decided to play innocent, so I gave her the rundown in a tone of endless patience.

“You were the one behind this whole ghost prank, weren’t you? When we were keeping watch in the school yard, you made the lights in the building flicker and played a tape of clapping noises and a woman crying, right? And you sent Tohko the bouquet of black lilies and the chain letter and put blood-spattered notes in our mailbox. All of that was you, wasn’t it?”

Maki set her paintbrush down, folded her arms, and looked me carefully up and down.

“Hmph… and what’s your proof?”

“When you go so over the top, even an idiot would know it was you. A bouquet of black lilies is way too expensive for any regular high schooler to buy for a joke. And as the granddaughter of the school’s director, you would be able to control the lights, too. You’re the only one who fits the criteria, and you’re the only one with something to gain for messing with Tohko.”

“And what would that be?”

“I’m sure you enjoyed watching Tohko get all worked up. Then you gave her bad leads and put burn marks and bloodstains on some notes and ratcheted everything up a notch. Besides, Tohko would be so obsessed with uncovering the truth about the ghost that she would probably come and ask you for information. And when she did, you would be able to demand whatever you wanted from her as compensation. And that’s exactly what ended up happening.”

The smile still hadn’t left Maki’s lips.

“And?”

“If Tohko found out, she’d probably go berserk.”

“If I tell you where she went, you don’t say a word.”

“I won’t.”

“Too bad. That’s not enough.”

“Huh?” I asked stupidly.

“You see, I don’t care if Tohko finds out,” Maki proclaimed coolly, her face like the Buddha gazing down at a stupid monkey.

“Wha—? But Tohko is going to be *steamed.* She holds grudges forever. She’ll stop talking to you. She’s the kind of immature girl who’ll make faces at you in the hall.”

“How wonderful. I wonder what it’s like to have Tohko puff up and glower at me or make faces. When she’s angry, her face is so adorable I want to cover it in ink and press it against a piece of paper. They say boys tease little girls they like, right? If Tohko despised me for the rest of her life… the thought alone sends shivers down my spine.”

I was floored. I lost all my momentum.

I was done for. Maki had the same proclivities as Ryuto did. Arguments from an ordinary kid like me wouldn't get through to people like them.

Maki saw my shoulders slump and she grinned.

"You're way too green to even think about threatening me, Konoha."

"I picked up on that, thanks."

"But out of respect for your audacity, I'll tell you one thing. Tohko went to see Ellen Dean."

Ellen Dean? I had never heard of her. And she was a foreigner?

I was bewildered, but Maki briskly ordered me away.

"All right now, go home. I'm busy. I have so much to do lately, it's giving me an ulcer. My illustrious grandfather and all the rest are after me about everything. They even dared to criticize my hobbies, so I'm really fed up. I'm just too sensitive for all this."

I wondered who Ellen Dean was. Was she connected to Kayano Kujo?

So Tohko went to see her, huh? But why did she take Kotobuki with her?

I was walking along, turning these questions over in my mind, when Ryuto suddenly jumped out from behind the school gate.

"I couldn't wait to see you. You don't have a cell phone, do you? Neither does Tohko. But cell phones are indispensable nowadays."

"You scared me!"

"How was Hotaru?"

Ryuto leaned forward, his face serious.

"Amemiya was out today. I couldn't see her."

"Is she bad?"

"I asked some of her classmates, but they didn't know."

He grunted. "She might've collapsed from hunger."

“If she did, I think her uncle would have taken her to the hospital.”

“That guy’s a snake. You can call him her uncle, but he used to be a total stranger.”

It looked like Ryuto was frantic with worry. He knit his brows and chewed on his nails irritably; then he suddenly looked up and said, “Let’s go see how she’s doing, Konoha.”

“Let’s play a game,” he said.

In the cold room that sunlight would never penetrate, lit by a candle’s flame, his lips twisted into a smile.

“From now on, whenever you’re in this room, you’re going to call me——.”

The name he gave her was that of a boy who had died long ago. A name she knew was secret and not to be spoken. He taught it to her.

“I’ll call you——.”

“I’m not——.”

“No, you *are*——.”

“No! I’m——.”

“——would never have looked at *me* with such frightened eyes or spoken like such a coward or retreated like that or have touched me so reluctantly or spoken in such a trembling voice, as if begging for my pity. No,——would never smile like that. Once more—no, that’s no different from that terrified little girl. It’s no use. Until you can smile like——, I’m withholding your food. I only cook for——. I don’t feed the likes of *you.* Here, change into this.——never wore green.”

That was the ritual for turning back time and resurrecting the dead.

In the windowless gray room, she waited each night for his visits.

She held her breath and listened with her whole body to the sound of his steps as he descended the stairs, and she became the girl he wanted her to be and greeted him with the face he wanted, with the mannerisms he wanted, with the voice he wanted.

Only the flickering light of the candle cast any warmth on her white face as she circled her arms around his neck in an embrace.

The light of the sun did not reach this place. That was because it was a cold grave, and she was a ghost, she thought. Ghosts can only exist in the world of darkness. *So during the day, I am dead. I can only be alive in the world of darkness.*

Her faces covered the dingy wall.

She looked at her and cackled.

She gripped her pen and wrote strings of letters on the wall, on her face.

She wrote the words like the storm that roiled in her heart morning, noon, and night, as if expelling them from her twitching throat.

But she must never tell him those words.

She must never open the pages of that old book to him.

Amemiya's house was a Western-style mansion built on top of a frigid hill.

The lonely road ascended without end. When we finally arrived at the gates, we could see a dense forest of trees within. The sky was overcast and the wind had picked up, rustling the trees loudly. The scene was straight out of a gothic horror story, and it unnerved me.

"Isn't it rude for us to just show up? Besides, her family might be home…"

"Kurosaki's at work right now. Besides, apparently he doesn't come home that much, so we don't have to worry. I've been to Hotaru's house two or three times, but there's never been anyone here when I come over."

"But if she was out sick, she might be asleep."

To be honest, I wasn't on board with this. After the way she'd left yesterday, wouldn't busting into her house just alienate her even more? I'm sure she would want to be left alone when she's upset…

"Then I'll call her and see."

Ryuto got his cell phone out of his pocket. There was a cute rabbit ornament

on it—who had given him that?

Apparently Amemiya picked up right away, and Ryuto started talking to her, relieved.

“Yeah, I… I heard you weren’t at school, so I came to see how—hey, Hotaru? Hotaru?”

What had happened? Ryuto’s color drained away and he started shouting Amemiya’s name.

She must have hung up.

Ryuto grunted. “She’s acting weird. She was really worked up, and it sounded like she was crying.”

Just then, we heard the sound of glass shattering from beyond the gates.

Ryuto rushed the gate, and I followed after him. The arched gate was unlocked, so we got inside surprisingly easily.

We heard the sound of glass shattering again, much more clearly this time.

From the yard, we could see that the glass doors of a room on the first floor were broken.

Past the shards of the broken doors, I caught a glimpse of a human figure swinging a long, thin stick.

The front door wasn’t locked, either. The piercing sound of shattering glass continued. I followed desperately after Ryuto without stopping to knock. We ran inside.

We dashed down the long hall, and Ryuto opened the door to the room. An astonishing sight was revealed to us.

The grand glass doors that faced the terrace were in ruins, and the glass on shelves and a sideboard were similarly demolished, transparent shards littering the thin carpet like gravel.

The torn curtains billowed in a strong wind from outside, and they tangled together like the sails of a storm-ravaged ship. The bookshelves were all empty of the neatly ordered spines that had once filled them, and the books lay scattered

on the floor.

The frames of the pictures decorating the walls were broken and hung at angles, on the verge of toppling from the wall; a set of deer antlers listed tragically, broken in half; the sofa's upholstery had been slit and stuffing billowed out. The dishes on the sideboard were also broken, and the table was covered in dents.

In the midst of it all, Amemiya was swinging a golf club, destroying everything in the room. She was dressed in nothing but a white nightgown.

She bit her lip so fiercely that it bled and tears rolled from her eyes, which flashed with fire, as her sticklike arms swung the club around to shatter a clock or the flat-screen TV.

The sight of her made my hair stand on end.

Amemiya?

Kayano?

No, this was definitely Amemiya—

There was blood on both of Amemiya's arms, her feet, and her face. She must have been cut by the flying glass. But she grit her teeth, seemingly oblivious to her injuries, and attacked a porcelain doll wearing a fluffy old-fashioned dress.

The doll's head flew off! Then she swung her club down on the doll's body, beating it to pieces as if she were cracking open a watermelon.

Two other clubs lay broken on the floor.

"Leave it, Hotaru!"

Ryuto caught Amemiya from behind and took the club from her. He flung it away.

Amemiya clawed at his face like a cat, struggling. "Let go of me!!"

"What's wrong, Hotaru? What happened?"

Her eyes bloodshot, Amemiya screamed in a ragged voice, "Go away! Don't come back here! You're dead! Stay away! Get out! Why did you come back? Your body's not here anymore—this body is mine! Go away! Stay away from me!

Don’t ever come back here!”

Ryuto wrapped his arms around her and drew her to his chest, rubbing her back firmly.

“Calm down, Hotaru. It’s me, Ryuto. You recognize me, right? Hotaru?”

“Hotaru? Yes—that’s me. I’m Hotaru! I’m not Kayano! I’m not my mother!”

“That’s right, you’re Hotaru. I’ll prove it to you. You’re Hotaru! Hotaru Amemiya!”

Amemiya shook her head wildly.

“No, you’re wrong. I’m Kayano. Kayano has to atone for her crimes. Kayano destroyed everything. She destroyed his heart… It was so sad. He cared only for her, and so deeply… No, that’s not true! He was the one… who destroyed everything. He took everything from me and turned me into a ghost. He stole the light from me, he stole the sun, and he shut me away in a world of darkness. He killed my father and Aunt Reiko!”

Terror came over Amemiya’s face, and she started shuddering.

“So scary… his eyes… He’s always watching me… I’m scared. I hate him. My story changed because of him. I can’t eat anything anymore. I don’t feel hungry. I hate him… but I can’t fight him. I’m afraid… so, so afraid…”

I looked again at the broken dishes on the sideboard.

White stew plates, bread platters, a transparent salad bowl, blue glasses…

Thin slivers of carrot stuck to a stew plate and dressing spilled out of the broken salad bowl, leaving a brown stain on the table.

The dishes were empty.

Someone had eaten a meal here. And not long ago.

“I’m scared, Ryu… I’m scared.”

Amemiya finally said Ryuto’s name. It seemed like her crying was more controlled now. Ryuto stroked her back and hair, speaking to her gently.

“It’s okay, Hotaru. I’m here. I’ll protect you. Okay, Hotaru? If you trust me and let me help you, I won’t ever betray you.”

Amemiya wrapped her thin arms around Ryuto and pressed her small face into his chest and wept.

“Ryu… Ryu…”

I stared at the scene before me in a daze, as if I were watching events happening in a whole different world.

My mind slowly emptied, and my body became transparent. I thought I might fade away like mist. A stabbing pain accompanied this sense of alienation, of tiny needles deep in my heart.

I didn't know what was going on or what had happened to Amemiya, but…

It must have been terrible, but…

I didn't need to be here…

The two of them were phantoms to me—just as Kayano had been that night in the chemistry lab, when I had been unable to do anything but watch as she left—and to them I was just a bystander, an invisible man.

I couldn't stand it. My chest tightened. There was nothing I could do about it.

I quietly left the room.

After dinner, I lay in bed and listened to a sad ballad on my headphones.

As I gazed up at the ceiling, I remembered how Ryuto had held Amemiya's thin body in his arms and how Amemiya had clung to him, sobbing.

It had been very beautiful—but it was also heart-wrenchingly bleak.

Because I had been unable to hold the girl I liked as Ryuto had…

Konoha, I don't think you would ever understand.

Miu had smiled sadly that day, on the roof of our middle school, when she quietly told me that.

Then she had fallen away backward, while I stood there and watched.

I don't think you would ever understand.

You would never understand.

I hadn't been able to do anything. My legs had failed me, my heart had seized up, and I'd been petrified. I couldn't even reach my hand out to her.

Each time I thought back to that day, my world turned upside down and terror gripped me. It was as if the world went dark every time.

If I'd been able to take Miu in my arms and comfort her like Ryuto had done, my story would probably be different.

But how was I supposed to encourage or comfort someone who was suffering?

A person's pain and suffering belongs to that individual—they don't belong to me. If I don't know what's bothering someone, I can't offer them any convincing encouragement or quick-fix comfort! I'm not that amazing!

But maybe that's just an excuse for my own cowardice…

When Ryuto suggested going to visit Amemiya at her house, I thought it would be better to tread lightly. It wasn't out of consideration for Amemiya; I just didn't want to get caught up in some big scene.

And I knew why I hadn't been able to stop Kayano from leaving. I felt that if I intruded any further into these girls' hearts, I wouldn't be able to turn back. I'd been afraid and my legs had turned to jelly.

Even if I could go back to the past, wouldn't I just do the same thing over again? Wouldn't I just watch Miu fall away again?

My throat tightened, letting a whimper escape. I rolled onto my side and balled my fist in the edge of the sheets.

I realized that my body was covered in sweat and my breathing had become ragged.

I desperately filled my mind with images, knowing that I had to think about something else.

A buzzing classroom, my classmates chattering excitedly, quiet Akutagawa, Kotobuki glaring at me and pursing her lips, and then Tohko sitting with her knees drawn up on a metal folding chair and happily flipping through a book.

As if guided by the sound of rustling paper and slender white fingers, my memories returned to the past.

Yes—something like this had happened before.

During the summer of my first year of high school.

There'd been a heat wave that summer. The sunlight beat down mercilessly, as

if trying to warm the earth after the long winter.

Those days had been hot enough to make anyone a little crazy.

At lunch, I was in front of the crowded lunch stand when suddenly I couldn't breathe. I gave up on buying any food and staggered away from there.

These attacks always came on me suddenly, as if they were a flock of crows swooping out of the sky and pecking me with their beaks. My fingers convulsed, and a rasping sound like the note of a broken flute escaped my throat. I couldn't breathe. All noise suddenly disappeared from the world, and all I could hear was the thudding of my heart echoing inside my head. My body felt heavy.

What am I going to do? Not in public… Was it because I was thinking about Miu? I just remembered how she liked custard rolls. Now what? Should I go to the nurse? No—I don't want anyone to find out about these attacks. I just started high school and finally got back my old life. My classmates all think I'm a nice, normal guy.

I don't want to stand out!

I sought out a place to hide my pathetic behavior, moving desperately.

Sweat was dripping in beads from my forehead and neck when I reached the book club's room in the western corner of the third floor. When I opened the door, I saw Tohko eating, surrounded by old books piled high like grave mounds.

She was sitting immodestly on a metal folding chair, with her knees drawn up to her chest despite the skirt of her uniform, turning the pages of a paperback book in her lap, and her throat danced as she swallowed.

The tiny room was full of dust, and fine motes tumbled dreamily in the light that streamed through the windows. Tohko's black braids spilled over her shoulders, and her long, drooping lashes cast a faint shadow over her clear eyes.

No matter how often I experienced it, the sight of her tearing a page out of a book with her thin fingers and popping it into her pink mouth was always creepy. But this time, as I stood gasping in pain, the way Tohko looked as she ate struck me as something peaceful and sacred.

In the midst of the golden dust, my weirdo club president with her sailor suit

and braids was eating her “lunch.”

She looks so very placid and joyful as she eats her books. So happy and dear and kind…

Tohko looked up and saw me.

By that time my breathing was more or less regular again, but the sweat on my skin suddenly turned cold and I felt a chill. My shirt was stuck to me uncomfortably, and I’m sure my face was as colorless as a candle.

Tohko’s brow furrowed in concern. “What’s wrong, Konoha?”

“Nothing… at all.”

My throat trembled, but I forced my voice out.

I couldn’t decide if it would feel better to leave right then or to fall to my knees and start crying. Tohko was probably confused when I just stood there trembling. There was something sad and pensive in her clear black eyes as she stared up at me.

I don’t know what she was thinking, but finally she held her book out to me, its pages shredded, and asked, “Do you want some?”

“I can’t eat that.”

I answered her instantly.

The tension in my heart relaxed, and I felt like my legs would give way beneath me.

“Sure? This book is really good,” Tohko murmured dejectedly, but her arm was still stretched straight out to me.

I moved closer and asked, “What are you reading?”

Her face lit up.

“It’s a short story collection by Kunikida Doppo. He was active during the turn of the twentieth century and was an admirer of the English poet Wordsworth. He left behind a lot of flavorful stories with backdrops painted as lyrically as his poems. His most famous work is ‘Musashino,’ which I want you to promise me you’ll read. The descriptions of the landscape the narrator sees as he strolls

through Musashino stretch out serenely, and it has sentences that are a little long, so it might be kind of hard to get into at first. But when you bite into each word one at a time and imagine the landscapes in your mind as you read, then you start to feel like you're walking with him through the groves of Musashino, listening to the calls of birds and the breeze.

"You can't rush through this book. You have to read it slowly and savor each word, as if you're resting on a moss-covered rock in a pure, silent wood, eating some of the best rice you ever tasted sprinkled with salt. Don't stuff your face with it and gulp it down frantically. Instead, take it bite by bite, working in from one end. Then the sweet, familiar, rustic taste will seep over your tongue slowly, and before you know it, you'll be full.

"Yeah, that's the kind of writing in 'Musashino.' "

Tohko's pale eyelids drooped, and she recited in a clear, springy voice, "… 'Those who find themselves lost on a walk in Musashino should not lament it. No matter the path, if he follows where his feet guide him, there are quarries there that must be seen, heard, and experienced. The beauty of Musashino may be hunted out at first simply by walking aimlessly the many thousands of roads that run through it.' Isn't that wonderful? This part is extradelicious. It's like fragrant salty fish inside the rice."

I accepted the book, which was made lighter by having half of its pages torn out, and flipped through it.

" 'Musashino' isn't in here. You ate it."

"Oops. It was the first one. I always eat the best-tasting parts first. But, but, but—'Poetic Images' is still in there! It's also romantic and super A-plus-plus recommended. And 'First Love'! That one is cutely heartwarming. It's the story of a smart-mouthed fourteen-year-old kid who goes to start a fight with an old scholar in his neighborhood. The last line is as tart and sweet as a cherry. And see, there's also 'Warmer Days.' This story is the same writing style as 'Musashino.' It's another great story packed full of lyricism reminiscent of Wordsworth."

Without realizing it, I had sat down next to Tohko, each of us holding one side of the eviscerated book, turning the pages as I listened to her expound on it.

It felt as if we were sitting together in a wood in Musashino with a gentle wind blowing by, thumbing through a book together and crumpling up its pages to eat it together.

When lunch was over and I went back to class, my stomach was full and content, although I hadn't eaten anything.

I lay on my bed, thinking.

Tohko had comforted me that day.

Tohko hadn't asked what was bothering me or hugged me or slapped me on the back and given me a pep talk.

She had just stayed by my side.

There was salvation to be found even in something that small.

It didn't have to be amazing or difficult. Just turning the pages of a book together…

I just wanted to find out what Tohko's author was like.

Ryuto's words popped into my mind, and I felt my ears burning.

I wasn't that great, and I'm sure Tohko saw me as nothing but an upstart kid who wrote snacks for her.

Like I saw Tohko as my troublesome club president who ate books.

Probably… definitely…

"I wonder where Tohko went with Kotobuki… I wonder if she's still angry at me…"

I gazed up at the ceiling, murmuring to myself.

Just then, my mother opened my door and came in.

"So you *were* listening to music. I thought you might be. I've been calling you from downstairs. There's a phone call for you. From a girl named Amano."

I leapt quickly out of bed. "Thanks, Mom."

I yanked my headphones off and took the cordless phone from her. My mother crinkled her eyes and left the room.

“Hello? This is Konoha.”

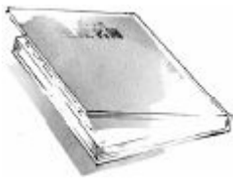
“Hello?”

Huh? She sounded so down.

Her voice was as frail as a chimpanzee’s that had been sick in bed for three days. It surprised me. But then Tohko said something even more surprising.

“I’m at the police station. Can you come and get me? Please?”

Chapter 5 – The Book Girl's Report



"So I was walking with Nanase when these scary old guys started talking to us… I was sure they were propositioning us, so I smacked one of them in the face with my bag and we ran away. Then they got even scarier and started chasing us, so we tried to jump over a wall. But then Nanase's foot slipped and she fell…"

Tohko was sitting in a metal fold-up chair in a room at the station, her hands clasped in front of her knees and her body scrunched up. Her face was flushed as she told me and the detective about how she had been taken into custody.

"I may be a book girl, but even I couldn't have imagined that people who looked like crooked loan collectors were detectives."

"So sorry we looked crooked to you, but you forced us to get even tougher when you whacked us with your bag."

An older detective popped his head in. I could see how his hard-bitten face had made Tohko want to run away as soon as he spoke to her. He had a meaty face and build, and if he had a fake sword, you could have mistaken him for the villain in a pro wrestling match.

"If I see a couple of girls in school uniforms walking through a disreputable neighborhood like that, I have to speak to them as part of my duties, you realize? But then I get a bag swung at my head!"

"… I'm *sorry*."

She slumped so much that her braids brushed the ground.

Why in the world had Tohko been walking through a sleazy place like that?

And what had happened to Kotobuki?

Tohko slumped down even further when I mentioned her.

“They took Nanase to the hospital. She broke something, and they said it’s going to take a month for a full recovery…”

Whoa. I was speechless. The detective scolded Tohko.

“I told you to call your guardians. What are you trying to pull, calling your buddy instead? Get your family over here, pronto.”

“That’s probably a good idea, Tohko,” I agreed gently.

But Tohko shook her head fiercely.

“N-no! I can’t ask Mrs. Sakurai to come and pick me up from the police station.”

Was that Ryuto’s mother? I could see how someone would have trouble asking that of the people she boarded with.

“Do you want me to ask my mom to come?”

“We can’t do that, either. It would destroy her image of me as a steadfast, reliable mentor. I already can’t ever call your house again.”

She had picked an odd time to start worrying about appearances, though I did recall my mother complimenting Tohko before on what a polite young woman she was.

“Then what are you going to do? They’re not going to let you go home in my custody.”

“Don’t you have any adults you can call on at times like this? Any old archaeologists who are still young at heart?”

“No, I don’t. And even if I did, he would be excavating ruins in the Amazon and would only come back to Japan once every four years, max.”

“Any older ladies, then? You must have at least one saintly aunt who teaches piano.”

Tohko looked up at me desperately.

“I don’t. Oh—but if you need a reliable, though sinister upperclassman with all kinds of connections who has pull with the police, who paints with one hand and conducts an orchestra with the other, I think I know someone like that.”

Tohko looked as if she was about to cry.

So it took us an hour.

Maki talked to the police and Tohko was released without incident.

“Konoha was the one who called you, Maki. Got that? It wasn’t me, okay? This was Konoha’s decision without my consent. If you’re going to demand something in return, ask Konoha, not me.”

Tohko emphasized this again and again to Maki in the car on the way home.

“Got it. Then maybe I’ll have Konoha strip for me,” Maki offered casually. She’d come in a limousine with a chauffeur.

“I don’t think so.”

For crying out loud, wasn’t Tohko the one who had called me, blubbering to please come get her because she’d gotten arrested? Why did *I* have to get naked?

But Maki had been the one leading her on in the first place, and if Maki hadn’t forged those notes or sent her black lilies, Tohko would never have gone so overboard.

Maki was looking at the red flush of humiliation on Tohko’s face with an exultant grin.

Why was everyone around me so selfish?

“So? What were you doing with Kotobuki? Why were you wandering around some shady neighborhood where the police would pick you up?”

“W-well…”

Tohko seemed to find it difficult to speak, and her voice cracked.

Maki smugly offered, “Why not come to my workroom? I’d like to hear the truth about this ghost that’s been troubling Tohko, too.”

“Ohhh, you have Jane Austen!”

The moment we set foot in the familiar workroom, Tohko walked toward the bookshelves ranged along the walls and let out a deliberate cry of admiration.

“Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, Mansfield, Somerset Maugham—it’s a smorgasbord of English literature! Spectacular… I recommend this one.”

She took down Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice.*

“Austen was an English writer born in 1775. Her style is light and cheerful. It’s like sitting in a Victorian garden under a pure blue sky eating ham or salmon sandwiches and petit fours adorned with nuts or fruit while you gossip with your friends. And she’s the ancestor of all romantic comedies. Elizabeth and Darcy’s love is so *thrilling.* A simple rundown of the plot would be—”

Just as Tohko was about to launch into her diatribe, I cut her off coldly.

“Don’t try to distract us, Tohko. We didn’t come here for a lecture on English literature.”

“Hmph.”

Tohko frowned and looked at me sulkily.

It seemed that she still held a grudge against me for blowing off the ghost investigation and that she didn’t want to tell me quite so easily what she’d gone to such trouble to find out.

But after Maki coaxed her—“He’s right, Detective. Lay out the results of your investigation for us, and please, don’t rush it”—Tohko got into the mood soon enough. Returning the Austen volume to the shelf, she puffed out her scant chest and said, “Heh-heh… If you’re going to twist my arm, I suppose I have no choice. Konoha, while you were skipping out on the club to go have fun with those girls, I continued my investigation into the recent ghost incidents on the sly and zeroed in on the truth.”

I had a feeling it hadn’t been very “sly” at all, but…

In fact, I had a feeling she had come to my class and caused a stir every day, but… In any case, I simply said, “Oh really?” to keep her talking.

“First I looked up the name Kayano Kujo in the student registers and discovered that she’d been enrolled here as a student seventeen years ago. I delved a little deeper, and it became clear that she had quit school in her second

year to get married and soon after had a little girl. The name of the man she married was Amemiya. Do you know what this means, Konoha?”

“… Hotaru Amemiya is Kayano Kujo’s daughter.”

I already knew that, so I said it without any real emotion. In contrast, Tohko’s voice grew even more high-pitched.

“That’s right! Hotaru’s mom died when Hotaru was in elementary school. The ghost is actually Hotaru’s mom. Her mom, Kayano, is possessing her!”

Wait… Hadn’t Tohko huffed that there was no such thing as ghosts and that this was some kind of conspiracy? Tohko raced on with her story, despite my amazement at the 180-degree flip in her position. Plus, she was suddenly talking about Hotaru as if they were friends.

“I was convinced that Kayano must have some kind of unfinished business, and I spread the wings of my imagination. So I intensified my investigation. Then, via *certain channels*, I received a tip that a housekeeper who had worked at the Kujo family home and who had known Kayano since she was little was running a costume pub. So I went to pay her a visit.”

Certain channels? She was being pretty cocky about this, considering Maki was standing right there. And there was a second housekeeper? Ms. Wada had worked at Amemiya’s house, but apparently there had been someone similar at Kayano’s house, too.

But all of these questions vanished from my mind when the words *costume pub* passed Tohko’s lips.

“A costume pub?! How could you go somewhere like that?”

I recalled the packet of tissues I’d seen in the club room with the name of a shady-looking business on it… But why would a housekeeper suddenly open up a costume pub? There must have been some serious drama in her life to inspire that!

“Even I was a little scared. The street it’s on isn’t the sort of place a serious young woman should be walking alone, and since the bar isn’t open during the day, I had to go at night.”

Tohko looked at me reproachfully.

I knew she was thinking, *If you had been there, you could have gone for me.* But I didn't want to make my costume pub debut at such an impressionable age. I wasn't interested in that kind of thing anyway.

"But Nanase said she would come with me." Tohko's face glowed. "Nanase is *such* a *won*derful girl. I was at the library, griping about how awful you are, and she nodded with such *conviction* and told me she understood. Bad-mouthing you really brought us together."

How was I the awful one again? *Please don't get carried away bad-mouthing your friend and become kindred spirits with Kotobuki over it.* I seriously considered quitting the book club just then.

Anyway, so Tohko and her new best friend Kotobuki had gone to the costume pub together.

"Why did you go in your uniforms?"

Of course they'd attract the detectives' attention walking around a place like that in school uniforms.

"Because visiting someone else's home is a formal occasion, so of course, we wore our uniforms. Everyone does that, Konoha—it even says to in the student handbook."

I wasn't so sure about that…

"Besides, if we went in our regular clothes, then we'd look like customers, wouldn't we?"

"That seems better than being mistaken for someone who works there dressed up as a high school student."

"Oh no, how did you know? Some weird old guy wearing cat ears started talking to me. 'Hey, are you new? What's your name? You wanna come sit at my table?' Blech."

Maki spluttered with laughter.

Tohko threw a glare at her; then she turned her face curtly away and resumed her story.

“Anyway, despite experiencing such ordeals, we were able to hear what the former housekeeper had to say about Kayano.”

“That’s great. Did you find out what Kayano’s unfinished business was?”

“Yeah. In childhood, she had promised herself to a boy.”

My heart skipped.

The image of Kayano sitting on a black heat-resistant desk, smiling in the moonlight, floated into my mind.

… I’ll tell you about him.

He was closer to me than anyone. He was a part of my soul and my other half.

Could that boy be…?

“She said his name was Aoi Kunieda and that he had lived in Kayano’s house ever since they were small. Kayano’s father went abroad for work, and once he brought back a little boy who spoke almost no Japanese. He was an orphan and apparently his father was Japanese, but he had been working in an awful place. Kayano’s father couldn’t stand by while that happened, and so he took custody of the boy and brought him into his family.

“The name Kunieda was taken from the butler who worked for the family at the time, and the housekeeper said that Kayano named him Aoi after he arrived.

“Aoi was one year older, and the two of them grew up together as if they truly were brother and sister. They were glued to each other inside the house and out. The housekeeper also told me that they shared a diary, which they wrote in using a number code. When she asked them what the numbers meant, Kayano giggled and told her, ‘It’s our secret.’ ”

That’s a secret only he and I know.

I heard an echo of Kayano’s sweet voice from the night in the school yard.

So the numbers were secret words that Kayano and her childhood friend had used to talk to each other!

But wait—how had Amemiya known that?

I couldn’t believe as Tohko did that the spirit of Amemiya’s mother was

actually possessing her.

Even if Amemiya didn't have access to those memories when she wasn't Kayano, they were still the same person, so anything Kayano said should have been data stored inside Amemiya.

In which case, when and where had Amemiya found out about Aoi Kunieda and the number code?

Maybe she'd heard about it while her mother was still alive?

"The event that altered their destinies happened when Kayano was in her fifth year of elementary school and Aoi was in his sixth. Kayano's father passed away after a sudden illness. Since her mother had already passed on, there was no longer anyone in her family to take care of her. Kayano was a minor, and she needed a guardian to manage her fortune. So her father's cousin came to the estate to be her guardian."

I had heard this story before, and my heart filled with foreboding.

A girl who had lost her parents.

A man who came to her estate to serve as her guardian.

It was exactly what had happened to Amemiya.

What did that mean? Could a mother and daughter so deeply linked share even their destinies?

According to Tohko, Kayano's guardian was named Hironobu Goto. He ruled tyrannically over the household and chased Aoi, Kayano's only ally, into a room in the basement. Apparently, the man tormented him ceaselessly in an attempt to drive him out of the house. Kayano went on a hunger strike to try to stop him.

"I won't eat anything unless Aoi makes it. If he's not here, then I'll starve to death. You'd get in trouble if that happened, wouldn't you, Uncle Hironobu?"

Aoi had already started helping out in the kitchen by that point. Even when her father was still alive, no sooner had Kayano childishly whined "I'm hungry" than Aoi would make her an omelet or pancakes, and she would eat them with a big smile on her face.

Kayano haughtily informed the adults that she wouldn't eat any other way,

and true to her word, she refused everything but what Aoi brought her.

No matter how famished she was—even if she collapsed from hunger—she would stubbornly refuse the food that anyone else gave her.

“I’ll only eat what Aoi makes. Where is he? Go and get him. Have him bring me my food.”

Tearing at the sheets of her bed, Kayano would call out for Aoi, only half-conscious, and the adults were forced to bend before her. Aoi remained in Kayano’s house as a servant.

Tohko continued. “The housekeeper said you could see their intimacy grow less sure of itself, and in middle school, Kayano met Takashi Amemiya, who was in college at the time. The story goes that when they were staying at their villa in the country, Kayano got hurt while she was out on a walk, and Takashi saw her when he was driving past and stopped to help.

“That was how they met, and soon after Takashi started inviting Kayano out on dates.

“Kayano was still in middle school, so at first they went out together like brother and sister, but as Kayano grew up, Takashi fell in love with her.

“And Kayano must have found Takashi charming. He was rich and kind and listened to everything she told him and escorted her everywhere. He was like a prince. Aoi, a servant, couldn’t give Kayano dresses or jewels or take her to parties or country estates…

“Aoi must have felt Kayano growing ever more distant. He must have felt so alone.”

Tohko lowered her eyes sadly, imagining how Aoi must have felt.

“Kayano got engaged to Takashi in her second year of high school. The next year she quit school to marry him, took the name Kayano Amemiya, and had Hotaru.”

It must have tormented Aoi to see Kayano wed to another man.

“The night before the wedding, he left the house and never came back. Kayano only found out about it after the wedding was over.

“She became half-crazed and called for a search.

“But Kayano was laid low by illness without ever finding him. Even the birth was dangerous.”

He got angry at me and went away. We never saw each other again.

She had whispered, knitting her eyebrows together sadly. She had cared for him so much, yet she had married someone else. Why? Perhaps her love for Aoi was not romantic, but instead the love of a sister for her brother.

“In any case, thanks to Takashi’s devoted care, Kayano avoided a miscarriage and gave birth to a lovely baby girl. Takashi named her Hotaru, and in her, a new star shone in his sky.

“Kayano was strong-minded and occasionally raged, but the two loved each other. Takashi gently embraced his younger, self-absorbed wife.

“But Kayano never forgot about Aoi after he disappeared. She often returned to her family home and lost herself in thoughts of the past. She may have felt guilty about Aoi because of how happy she had become…”

Tohko’s words pierced my heart.

Had Kayano felt the anguish and sorrow of her heart being burned to cold ashes, as I did about Miu whenever I started to feel like my life was calm and peaceful?

Just before her death, Kayano received a letter informing her that Aoi had died abroad.

“She had already struggled with her illness, but news of Aoi’s death must have been such a shock that it took away her will to live. Kayano stopped eating anything at all, and before the week was out, she drew her last breath.”

A somber mood filled the room.

Tohko and Maki were both gazing at the wall or the floor, their eyes drooping morosely.

I was struck bodily by the reminder that Kayano no longer belonged in the world of the living.

When Kayano prayed to go back and fix the past, she must have been thinking of her childhood friend.

Tohko looked up and her voice was energized again. “And then I figured it out. The ghost was in fact the spirit of Kayano inhabiting her daughter, Hotaru, because she still pined for her lost Aoi.”

I was floored. Maki had been gazing at the wall in a subdued mood, and she too gaped at Tohko’s buoyancy.

Tohko balled up a fist and told us, in the full grip of her delusion, “Inside Hotaru’s body, it was Kayano dating all those boys, searching for some vestige of Aoi. And she haunted the school each night, then left love letters for Aoi in the book club’s mailbox. This truly is a grand passion that crosses the boundaries of time.”

Ummm…

The story jumped all at once from horror to fantasy, sapping my energy.

Hotaru Amemiya’s personal history and the troubles she faced were much deeper and more complex than Tohko imagined. But what those might be… I didn’t know the true reason why Hotaru Amemiya transformed into her mother, either. There wasn’t a good point to interrupt Tohko anyway.

“So you see, Konoha, in order to appease Kayano’s lost soul, I think you should write a love story starring her and Aoi and give it a happy ending. We can offer it at Kayano’s grave. It’s in your hands, Konoha.”

“Wait—why am I writing it?!” I howled, but Tohko planted her hands on her hips and glowered at me.

“It’s your punishment for skipping out on club activities for so long, obviously. I found out all of that stuff, so I think you can stand to help out a little, too.”

Then her expression suddenly relaxed, and she broke into a sunny smile. Her face looked like a field of wildflowers in spring.

“Write a suuuper sweet story and send Kayano back to heaven. Then I’ll pretend none of this eeever happened.”

“I see…”

Maki exploded with laughter, apparently unable to contain herself any longer.

“Oh, what’s so funny, Maki?”

“Heh-heh. Nothing at all. I hope you can help the ghost find peace.”

Tohko stuck her tongue out at Maki; then she grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the workroom.

Maki looked deeply satisfied that Tohko had granted her the funny face she’d craved.

“So, Konoha… when you were skipping out on the club, did you really go on dates with girls?”

As soon as we were outside the music building, Tohko glanced up at me worriedly.

“No, I didn’t. I was meeting Ryuto.”

“Ryuto?!” Tohko jerked her hand away from me and her eyes widened.

“I ran into him near the school, and I guess that really brought us together…”

Oh man, harsh.

Tohko’s mouth opened and then shut, as if something were bothering her more than her mistrust for me.

“Y-you did? I mean, um… Ryuto didn’t say anything funny to you, I hope!”

“Like the fact that you eat kids’ books for breakfast and tell everyone how great they are?”

“Th-that’s fine! No, I meant…”

I could see how flushed Tohko was even in the moonlight. She muttered, “If he didn’t say anything, then never mind,” and strode off ahead of me.

Could she mean *that*? When he told me I was Tohko’s author? A ribbon of heat spread over my cheeks, too. But I shut it away inside and hurried after Tohko.

“About what you said before… I can’t write a love story, okay?”

“What? You’re so cheap! Oh, I know. I can lend you some good Harlequin romances to study.”

“That’s okay. The one you loaned me before left quite an impression.”

“Geez, Konoha. If you don’t understand how girls feel, you’re never going to get chocolate from anyone serious on Valentine’s Day.”

“I don’t want any. I prefer red bean jelly.”

“Then you’re never going to get any red bean jelly from anyone serious.”

“I’d hate to see the girl who gave me homemade red bean jelly for Valentine’s Day.”

“You’re so selfish, Konoha.”

We walked down the dark streets, sharing a conversation just like old times. Tohko stopped at the corner.

“I have to go this way now.”

“Do you want me to walk with you?”

“It’s fine. If any perverts show up, I’ll hit ’em with my bag.” She laughed brightly and then broke off. “Oh, Konoha—”

She grabbed the sleeve of my shirt and cocked her head meekly.

“Will you go with me tomorrow… to check on Nanase?”

His earliest memory was of being in a dark, unclean, disreputable place.

He had never once been to school. He was working in a dank factory where the sun never shined, hugging his empty stomach, when the gentleman, who came from an island nation in the East, took him into his care and brought him back to his mansion.

His father, or perhaps both his parents, had been Japanese. He was not like the gentleman’s child—his demeanor seemed to despise and doubt everything he encountered, which had appealed to the man’s eccentricity. That was why the gentleman had taken him away.

This man had a lovely, audacious daughter one year his junior.

“Daddy, what’s this dirty little boy?”

The girl had spit the question out suddenly at their first meeting, scrunching

up her haughty face and scrutinizing the boy from every angle. Then she laughed like a bright red flower opening. "Oh, is this my present? He seems dirty, but if I look really close, his eyes are a pretty color. So I guess I can keep him."

"I decided that you're going to be my little brother," she declared brashly despite the fact that she was younger.

Thereafter, wherever they went, the children were always together.

Morning, noon, evening, and night, the two spent their time nestled together, their hands clasped, a single being made from two people.

"Aoi! Aoi! I'm hungry. Make me some pancakes with lots of honey on top."

"My hands are tired. Feed me, Aoi."

She opened her mouth daintily, and he cut up her pancakes with a silver fork and fed them to her. She beamed back happily.

"They're great. You're amazing, Aoi. I like your food best, better than any of those nice restaurants."

Their days continued in this easy way.

Until the gentleman who was their shelter drew his final breath after a sudden illness…

After school, Tohko and I went to the hospital where Kotobuki was staying bearing an assortment of jams and a bouquet of flowers tied with a pink ribbon.

"I'm so sorry, Nanase!"

Tohko held out the box of jams and bowed her head deeply.

Beside her, I held out the bouquet and bowed my head just as deeply.

"I'm very sorry for the amount of trouble my club president has put you through."

Kotobuki was sitting up in bed, dressed in light blue pajamas. Her face turned bright red, and she struggled to find something to say.

"Oh no, I—You don't have to apologize… I was the one who said I would go

with you, and then I was so clumsy and fell off the wall, which got you arrested… I, um, I really am sorry."

Kotobuki stretched out both hands to accept the box of jams.

"Th-thank you."

Then her cheeks flushed even darker red, and she looked cautiously at the flowers in my hand. She hugged the box of jams to her chest and stared at the red rosebuds and pink sweet peas and baby's breath, looking unsure about what to do.

"Do you not like the flowers?" I asked nervously, glancing up from my bow.

She pursed her lips and shook her head.

"I didn't say that. Thank you. Really. Er, I'm saying that to Tohko. Not you, Inoue," she emphasized, seizing the bouquet and gently hugging it and the box of jams.

"Oh, I brought a vase, too. I'll go get some water for the flowers."

Tohko showed her the vase she'd bought at a dollar store on the way, and Kotobuki handed the flowers to her reluctantly.

"Um… thanks."

"Be right back!"

Tohko left the room, and Kotobuki and I were alone together.

Kotobuki constantly touched her hair or adjusted the collar of her pajamas, her face sullen.

"So… you don't have to share this room with anyone?"

"Someone got discharged this morning, and the other one is getting a test."

"Oh."

"Um… Tohko chose those flowers, right?" she asked brusquely, her face still turned away.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, she did," I answered, confused.

"Hmph… I figured. She has very good taste. Yeah, *you* never could have picked

them out," she trailed off darkly.

Was I imagining it? She seemed almost disappointed.

"Um… I really am sorry you got hurt. And you're not even going to be able to take the midterms."

"The teachers are letting me do makeup tests, so it's no big deal."

"But—"

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"Maybe not, but still—"

"Why did you come?"

"… I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have?"

Color rose high in Kotobuki's cheeks and she snapped, "That's not what I… I—I just… If you'd told me you were coming, I would have changed. My pajamas are all wrinkled, and my hair… it's all frizzy. And I don't have any makeup on. And I smell sweaty."

"It doesn't bother me."

"Well, it bothers me!"

She spun around to yell at me, and her face instantly turned red and she turned away again.

"I mean, I don't really care about you. Don't get the wrong idea."

"O-okay."

Kotobuki bit her lip and fell silent again. The room was utterly still.

The air felt heavy. I wished Tohko would come back soon.

I didn't know where to look, so I turned to the window. Kotobuki's room was on the seventh floor, so I could look down at the people going in and out of the hospital. Leaden clouds covered the sky outside, and it looked ready to rain at any moment.

Just then, a girl wearing our school's uniform came out of the building supported by a tall man in a suit.

Huh? Could that be Amemiya?

I leaned closer to the window to try and get a better look, but just then Kotobuki murmured in a low voice, “You must think I’m an awful person.”

“What—?”

I looked hastily over at Kotobuki and started to deny it. She hung her head, her lips still pulled into a frown; she looked like she was on the verge of tears.

Oh no! What’s wrong, Kotobuki?!

I gulped in surprise. Kotobuki crushed the edge of her blanket in her fists and said in a raspy voice, “You… you don’t have to deny it. I know all I ever do is glare at you, and I’m always rude… But—you may not remember it, but I… in middle school, I…”

Middle school? I thought Kotobuki had gone to a different middle school.

I had no idea what she was getting at. I just felt even more bewildered.

“Hey there, Nanase! We’re here to visit youuu!”

Girls from our class burst into the room.

“When we heard you broke something falling down the stairs at a train station, we were so surprised. Huh? Inoue?”

The girls’ eyes widened.

“Oh wow! I didn’t think *you’d* be here!”

“Seriously, what a shock!”

“And you know how much Nanase—”

Hates you, she was probably going to say. The girl next to her had elbowed her, making her break off abruptly.

Kotobuki’s face was harsh. “Don’t get any weird ideas. Inoue is just Tohko’s bootlicker. He tagged along with her.”

“Oh, I see. But that’s such a mean thing to say!”

“Being in the hospital sure didn’t sweeten you up. Poor Inoue.”

The girls laughed lightheartedly.

Kotobuki and I both looked away uncomfortably. I wondered what she had been about to tell me.

“We thought you might be bored, so we brought you tons of stuff.”

They dumped a pile of manga and mystery novels on the bed.

In their midst, I spotted a familiar sky blue cover. I felt my heart lurch to a halt.

Kotobuki’s eyes popped open.

One of the girls cried cheerfully, “Oh, it’s Miu Inoue! That takes me back. I read this in middle school. It was so amazing.”

“Me, too! The emotions are so real; I totally identified with it. Maybe because the author was a middle schooler, too. Nanase, you said you never read Miu Inoue, right?”

Kotobuki fidgeted, as if something was bugging her, and she muttered evasively, “D-did I?”

A girl named Kimura had brought Miu’s book, and she held it out with a huge grin on her face.

“Here. You should take this opportunity to read it! I’m *positive* you’ll love it. The dialogue and narration are both real concise, and they just hit you. You feel great when you finish reading it. Like you just got to experience something really beautiful.”

“Toootally. I don’t usually read books, but I was completely obsessed with Miu. It’s like a bible for teenagers. The movie was really great, too. The imagery was so romantic and airy, which is the perfect match for the book’s atmosphere. I saw it three times.”

“I wonder why Miu Inoue never wrote another book. It’s such a waste of her genius.”

I stared at my shoes and in a trembling voice announced, “She’s not a genius.”

The words sounded shockingly cold even to me. They were like an icy whip snapping through the amiable atmosphere.

The girls looked at me in surprise.

My earlobes and throat burned and my hands trembled, balled into tight fists.

“What’s so interesting about that book? The writing is bad, the composition is sloppy—it’s like being forced to read a middle schooler’s shallow poetry. It’s laughable. Don’t you think everyone just made a big deal out of it because a fourteen-year-old girl won the award? She might as well have been a panda or a seal. I hate Miu Inoue.”

The force of my words came back tenfold, digging into my own heart.

Everything in that book was a total lie.

A boundless, gossamer world couldn’t really exist. The idea that dreams could come true was nothing but the irresponsible nonsense of an immature child who had never experienced true pain.

The world was smaller than that, more oppressive, darker.

And people’s hearts weren’t as pure and honest as a sunny sky, either. The deeper you ventured, the murkier things became, the more sourly they smelled, until it made you nauseous.

All of it—all of it—was a trick. The story that Miu had written and Miu herself.

The hospital room was gripped by silence, everyone’s faces frozen in surprise. Kotobuki’s lips moved wordlessly like a fish’s.

I had to recover somehow, but my jaw was locked with tension and my throat was trembling; I tried hard, but I couldn’t smile. My ears burned and my breathing was labored. I started to leave the room, but Tohko was standing in the doorway, holding the vase full of flowers.

Had she heard that ugly outburst? She was looking at me with concern and sadness.

Before Tohko could say anything to me, I pushed my voice out of my burning throat desperately.

“I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

Then, trying to avoid Tohko’s eyes, I passed her and moved quickly to the hospital lobby.

What a failure!

Regret assaulted me; my entire body was shaking and my ears roared.

Failure! Failure!

They had believed that I was totally harmless and that they could say anything and I would just smile vacantly.

That I was a genial guy who would never raise his voice or pick a fight like I had just done.

The walls that I had so fervently built up had fallen all too easily because of one book.

I didn't know where I was running anymore. My only thought, whipping frantically through my heart, was to escape back to my room as soon as I could, to shut the door, and pretend that none of this had happened.

When I reached my house, I crawled into bed without getting undressed and pulled the blanket over my head.

I was tired of this. Was I going to have to run like a criminal every time I saw or heard Miu's name? Would I have to keep regretting what I'd done?

Why did everything keep happening to me?! I never wanted a prize! I never wanted to become an author!

I only wanted Miu to be beside me, smiling—even if it was a false paradise, even if it was a papier-mâché of lies, I never noticed. I had been happy and had loved that papier-mâché world.

But Miu had glared at me, her eyes full of hatred; she had laughed that I wouldn't understand, and she had fallen away from me.

Why had I eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge?

Why couldn't I have stayed a foolish, happy child, ignorant of all this?

Kayano had said that to get back something you had lost, you had only to reverse time. I'd told her it was impossible.

But really? Was it truly impossible? Why couldn't time be reversed?

If God wouldn't grant me that, then I'd ask the devil!

I would give him my soul—anything—*if only he would send me back.*

Then I would tear apart that novel encrusted with lies and throw it into the trash. I would never write a novel, ever…

I'd wished for it two years ago, and I wished for it again now until I choked, tearing at my sheets, pressing my face into my pillow, and grinding my teeth against the pain. It felt like my body was being carved up by burning knives—just as it had then—but I was forced to bear it.

My mother came to tell me dinner was ready, but I told her I didn't want to eat. I didn't pull the blanket off my head. I told her I didn't feel good and that I wanted to sleep.

Then I fell asleep, sinking into the murk.

The next morning, when hunger and fatigue caused me to stagger downstairs to the living room, my mother told me Tohko had called.

"How do you feel? Do you want to take off school today?"

"I'll go. We still have midterms."

"All right, but don't overdo it."

My mother's face betrayed her concern for me, and it clutched at my heart. I was ashamed to look her in the face.

All I did was make my family worry. And now I was doing it to Tohko, too…

The table had been set with white rice and miso soup and the leftover veggie burger and tomato-and-asparagus salad from the night before. I ate in silence and then went to school.

When I entered the classroom, the girls who had come to visit Kotobuki saw me and their faces stiffened awkwardly.

I steeled myself, got my breathing under control, and smiled pleasantly.

"Morning," I tried, embarrassed. "I'm… sorry about yesterday. I was angry… about something else, and I just went off."

That made their faces soften with relief, and they answered brightly.

"You're not the kind of person who blows up like that. You scared us!"

“Yeah! But Nanase told us she said some kind of mean stuff to you before we came. She said it upset you, and that’s why you left.”

“… She said that?”

I was confused.

“Yeah. She seemed really depressed. I think she feels bad about it. She says awful things, but she’s not a bad person. Maybe she’s just stressed out because she got stuck in the hospital out of nowhere. Try to forgive her.”

Kotobuki had covered for me? Why?

Thinking back over all of Kotobuki’s past behavior, I couldn’t begin to guess why she would help me out to the point of making herself the bad guy. Shaken, I sat down at my desk, but then Akutagawa leaned over and murmured, “Your friend is here.”

Tohko was hiding behind the door at the back, peeking covertly into the room.

When I stood up and headed to the hallway, she jerked back and flattened herself hastily against the wall. Her long, thin braids swung out from the wall like cats’ tails.

I stood in front of her nervously.

“My mom said you called me. Thanks. I’m sorry I left you there yesterday.”

Tohko looked at me in concern.

“It’s no problem. I’m sorry I forced you to come during exams. I’m glad you came to school today.”

It looked like she still had something on her mind, and she slumped against the wall. I could see now that her eyes were red and bloodshot.

“Is something wrong?”

Her mumbled reply was crestfallen. “… Ryuto didn’t come home the day before yesterday. If it were only one day, maybe, okay—but this is the first time that we haven’t heard anything from him for two days. And yesterday a DVD he’d been waiting for came. You’ve been hanging out with Ryuto a lot lately, right? Did he say anything to you?”

The day before yesterday—that was the day Ryuto and I had gone to visit Amemiya at her house.

And Ryuto hadn't come home? Could it be—?

Just then, the bell rang.

"I'm sorry. Can you come back after the exam is over?"

During the first period break, I met Tohko on the landing of a deserted staircase and told her everything that had happened. I told her that Ryuto was going out with Amemiya, that the two of us had been investigating her, and that two days ago we'd gone to her house to see how she was doing.

Tohko's eyes were round.

"I… can't believe Ryuto's been going out with Amemiya. I mean, he has so many other girlfriends. How many is he cheating on this time? He's beyond belief. How come you didn't tell me this right away, Konoha?"

"Ryuto asked me to keep it a secret from you. It was between men."

Tohko didn't look like she accepted that. She frowned and glared at me petulantly, but she seemed to realize that this was no time to attack me. Her concern instantly returned.

"So Ryuto may be with Amemiya. I wonder if she's here today."

The bell rang again, and we had to go back to our classrooms.

During second-period break, Tohko and I went by Amemiya's classroom.

We asked a girl in her class about her.

"Amemiya? She's been out since yesterday. Actually, I heard she quit school now that she's getting married."

Getting married?! Tohko and I looked at each other in shock.

"Did Hotaru tell you that?" Tohko squeaked.

"No, not quite. Someone went into the teachers' office for something, and they were all gossiping about our class. They were saying she got into a rivalry with Himekura over a guy and that the Princess hated her and forced her to drop out."

“Hold on. What do you mean? Maki and Hotaru were in a love triangle?”

I leaned forward just as eagerly as Tohko did. A love triangle? And with *Maki*?

“Well, I guess there’s been this tall guy in a suit who comes to pick Amemiya up in his car all the time? And someone says she saw Maki get into the same car before. She said Amemiya must have stolen Himekura’s boyfriend.”

“Tohko, does Maki even have a boyfriend?!”

“I never heard of one.”

Tohko shook her head, puzzled.

Next, we headed to Maki’s classroom, but we didn’t find her there, and the music building was locked.

When the bell rang, we rushed back to our respective classrooms.

What in the world was going on? Amemiya was getting married? Why so suddenly? And to whom? Was Kurosaki the man who came to pick her up? Or was it Amemiya’s new boyfriend? And he was supposed to be Maki’s ex-boyfriend? And where had Ryuto disappeared to?

Once again I pictured Amemiya’s fierce expression as she swung the golf club around to destroy everything in that room, her white nightgown stained with blood. I felt a chill run down my spine.

I had the mother of all bad feelings about this.

After school, Tohko came running to my classroom, her face pale.

She hadn’t been able to find Maki.

“Konoha, I’m going to try going to Amemiya’s house. Ryuto might still be there.”

Chapter 6 – This Is Our Secret Room

She stared at the blood dripping onto the floor, her chest heaving wildly.

“No! Don’t open your mouth any farther! Don’t take my hand! Don’t come near me!”

Blood ran down his face, his arms, his hair. He lay at her feet.

The carpet was dyed red where it had soaked up his blood.

Her throat burned and her stomach knotted painfully as she let out a scream. Blood spread across her vision.

His stomach was full of holes. And oh, his blood kept flowing. It wouldn’t stop.

He had been such a nice person. Such a warm person. As brilliant as the noontime sun. Even when she had been gloomily silent, he never lost his patience. Instead, he would tell her shockingly daring or funny stories in his strong, cheerful voice. When he looked at her, his eyes told her how deliriously happy he was to be able to spend his time with her. When they walked through crowds, he would offer his hand to her and smile. His hand felt big and warm around her own. Whenever he was around, the world spilled over with bright sunlight.

But now what? I’ve killed him.

The weather deteriorated quickly and it began to rain. The wind gusted.

Black clouds piled up over the mansion perched atop the hill, and the farther up the hill we climbed, the more violent the wind became, threatening to rip the umbrellas from our hands.

Tohko had her violet umbrella and mine was sea blue. We held the handles firmly as we stood outside the gate and buzzed the intercom.

But the intercom seemed to be broken, and there was no reply.

The gate was unlocked, just as it had been when Ryuto and I had come two days ago, and it swung open with a slight push.

“Hello?” Tohko called quietly and then went inside. I moved in after her.

When Tohko saw that the window of the room facing the terrace was shattered and a curtain had partially slipped off and was flapping in the wind, she paled and gulped.

We leaned forward, still holding up our umbrellas, to peer into the room.

It was exactly the way I had last seen it two days ago, the floor littered with shards of glass and porcelain and ugly cracks running across the television and shelves. The dishes thrown across the sideboard were exactly as they had been, too. No—the room looked even more ghastly in the darkness of the falling rain.

Tohko’s hand trembled slightly as she gripped the handle of her umbrella.

Just then, lightning flashed overhead.

“Eek!”

Tohko ducked her head in surprise.

Huge beads of rain carried by the fierce wind fell over our heads like a jungle squall and pounded against our umbrellas.

“Oh—”

Tohko cried again and closed her umbrella. Then she went into the room through the broken glass doors as if in a trance, without even knocking.

She knelt down on the floor and picked something up.

“What is it?” I asked, following her in.

There was a black cell phone in her hand, and she held it out to me, her lips trembling.

It had a rabbit ornament hanging off it. This was Ryuto’s cell phone!

The white rabbit was stained red. Looking around, I could see splotches of blood on the carpet.

“This… is Ryuto’s cell phone. Something’s happened to him!”

“It could be Amemiya’s blood on it. She was cut all over by the glass.”

I tried to reassure Tohko, but unease swirled deep in my heart like an approaching rain cloud. Ryuto said Kurosaki had followed him and that guys who looked like mobsters had threatened him. He said he had almost been run over by a car.

Had Kurosaki come home after I’d left?

Tohko slipped the cell phone into the pocket of her uniform and stood up. She left the room and started searching for Ryuto. She opened every door on the first floor, all the while calling his name.

“Ryuto! Ryuto! If you’re there, answer me! Hellooo? Is anybody home?!”

Each time thunder pealed, Tohko cringed.

We searched every cranny of the drawing room and kitchen but found no one.

As we were starting up to the second floor, Tohko found a door behind the stairs.

“I wonder where this door goes.”

“You don’t think it’s just a closet?”

Tohko turned the handle and the door opened. There was a set of stairs leading down. It was dark at the bottom, and I couldn’t make out much of anything.

Tohko swallowed loudly.

“Let’s see what’s down there.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Then you wait here.”

“I can’t do that—hey, Tohko!”

I watched as Tohko gritted her teeth and descended the stairs. I hurried after

her.

In the darkness, it felt as if we had sunk into a bottomless swamp. The chill, murky air clung to our skin. The sound of thunder crashing outside grew gradually more distant behind us.

We had no light, so we followed the wall with our hands and searched out each step with our feet, holding our breath as we moved forward. The walls were cool to the touch, and my fingertips shook nervously.

“Try turning his phone on, Tohko. We can use it as a light.”

I heard a rustling noise as Tohko got it out of her pocket.

“Um, wait. What do I push? I’m really bad with electronics…”

“Let me see it.”

When I turned it on, the screen and numbers flared up out of the darkness.

Relying on the tiny light, we descended even farther until we reached a heavy-looking gray door at the bottom.

Tohko knocked. There was no answer.

“E-excuse me,” she muttered, as if someone would stop her, and opened the door.

It was dark and hard to tell, but it looked like there was a bed and a bookshelf inside. I ventured in reluctantly. As I held the cell phone up to look around, a sharp bolt of icy terror shot through me from fingertips to toes.

The stained gray walls bristled with numbers.

17-5-25-28-1-17-15-17-4-5

17-5-25-28-25-28-2-5-12-21-28-15-5-11

10-5-23-21-10-24-21-8-28-22-5-8-21-12-21-8

10-24-21-28-10-13-5-28-5-22-28-11-9-28-22-5-8-28-21-10-21-8-4-25-10-15

9-10-5-6-28-9-10-17-15-28-17-13-17-15

4-5

19-5-3-21-28-18-17-19-1

25-28-2-5-12-21-28-15-5-11

25-28-13-5-4-27-10-28-2-21-10-28-23-5-28-1-17-15-17-4-5

17-5-25

17-5-25

17-5-25

17-5-25

Red numbers, black numbers, thick and spidery; numbers written in neat, gentle handwriting and wild numbers scrawled onto the wall in the throes of wild emotion.

The numbers were so disturbingly intense that they seemed to pulse on the edge of floating off the wall. And in their midst, *countless heads flickered into being, staring at us with Amemiya's blood-spattered face*.

"Eeeeeeeek!!"

Tohko shrieked, just before the door slammed shut behind us.

Tohko screamed again.

I rushed to the door and turned the handle. It only rattled but didn't give. It was locked!

"Please! Open up!"

There was no answer. We heard only the faint sound of footsteps running up the stairs.

Who in the world had shut the door?!

My breathing started to get more ragged, and the blood rushed to my head. How could this have happened? My head was spinning. No—this was no time to have an attack. I dug my nails into the palms of my hands and struggled to retain my reason.

I stiffly turned the cell phone toward the wall and peered at it, trying to calm my heart. It still felt like it was about to explode. I saw again the sweep of

numbers written in red and black, and above those, dozens of photos taped to the wall. Amemiya was in all of them and in each one, a big *X* had been drawn across her face in red marker. It was these photos that had looked like a cluster of bleeding faces.

As soon as I felt relief washing over me, a fresh horror rose up in me with a chill. I felt my hand go cold around the cell phone.

“Look… that photo…”

I felt that there was something strange about the girl in that picture and turned around to get Tohko’s opinion on it.

When I turned, I saw her crouched down on the ground, burying her face in her knees and covering her ears with both hands, shaking. And it was no ordinary shivering: She was shuddering as if she were wearing her short-sleeved summer uniform in a blizzard in the dead of winter.

“Tohko, are you all right?!”

“No… the ghosts… I’m afraid. I hate horror stories… more than anything.”

I was shocked to hear how fragmented her voice was, more frail and tearful than I’d ever heard her before.

“What? But you threatened to drag the ghost out of hiding! You even kept watch for it every night. And didn’t you say that ghosts and curses are unscientific? You said you didn’t believe in them.”

Tohko shook her head fiercely, keeping her face hidden.

“If you found out how scared I was of ghosts, you would start writing me scary stories, so I pretended that they didn’t bother me.”

“What are you talking about? I wouldn’t do something like that.”

But maybe, I reflected, if I was aggravated, I would start writing more ghost and horror stories, just like Tohko said.

When I first joined the book club, I had written strange stories on purpose in order to make Tohko blubber about how bad they tasted. Considering that, I couldn’t really blame her for being cautious.

Actually, I remembered that on the day the notes started appearing in our mailbox, I had written a story about decapitated heads dropping off trees, which made Tohko shriek about how spicy it was and made her eyes water.

I didn’t see why she needed to eat the stories if they were that bad, but Tohko had never left the stories I wrote uneaten. Whether she said they were gross or sour or salty, she ate every last scrap.

If I wrote her horror stories chock-full of ghosts every day, she would finish those, too, despite her tears.

She was shaking, and it looked like she was crying.

“B-boys are all the same. When we were little, Ryuto would follow me around shouting my name. He was so tiny and cute, but then he got so big all of a sudden, and… and he got so full of himself because he had hair growing on his legs… Whenever I would scold him for something, he would read scary books aloud to get back at me. I know you’d be like that, too, Konoha. You always forget your duty to help your president out, and you write about decapitated heads or dead spirits or curses or *The Village of Eight Graves* or *Hell’s Gate Island*. You’re like some kind of demon.”

“… My duty?” I repeated. “I think you’re the one who’s supposed to be helping

me, actually."

A sob racked her and she sniffed. "See? You say things like that."

But it was the truth.

"I… I was at a total loss over how to protect the book club from the ghost's evil grip, and you… *snf*… you cut me out… *hic*…"

"I didn't cut you out."

Hanging her head and crying so pettishly made Tohko seem like a much younger girl. Bittersweet feelings surged up in me. It was a strange sensation, a little unsure but gradually warming my heart, like holding a baby bird in my hand.

Why did I never feel like I could stand up to her?

I crouched down next to her and looked into Tohko's face before quietly telling her, "I didn't want anything bad to happen to you. You always get carried away and do stupid stuff. I was worried. I think Ryuto felt the same way. Because you're a girl, Tohko."

Saying this, I realized for the first time that it was true. I didn't want Tohko to do anything dangerous.

"You think I get carried away? I—"

"Just try and tell me you don't," I interrupted calmly.

She caught herself and then started crying again. I broke.

"… Do you want a handkerchief?"

"I—I have one."

"Okay…"

"But gimme."

She was still keeping her face hidden. I reached into my bag and got out the light blue handkerchief my mother had ironed for me and held it out to Tohko.

"Here. Wipe your face off."

Tohko took the handkerchief in her white hand and pressed it to her face.

"*Snf*… You're the one who made me cry, Konoha."

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you really apologize?”

“… Yes.”

“*Hnk*…”

“Hey, don’t blow your nose.”

“Hmph… How can you be so calm?”

Talking like this finally coaxed Tohko to stop crying, and she timidly peered out from behind the handkerchief.

“I’m sorry for crying. I’ll wash your handkerchief for you.”

She folded it neatly and put it in her pocket; then she stood up, looking embarrassed.

“Okay, so we have to think of a way out of here,” she said with a smile.

Immediately after, she caught sight of the photos on the wall and shrieked and cowered away again.

“I—I forgot. Oh god, there are ghosts everywhere.”

“Look closer. They’re not ghosts, just photographs.”

“What?”

Tohko turned hesitantly to look at the wall. I shone the cell phone in that direction.

She gasped and her eyes widened; then Tohko stood up and moved toward the wall.

She ran her fingers over the numbers written there and curiously examined the photos with red *X*’s over their faces.

“The girl in these photos… She looks a lot like Hotaru, but it’s not her.”

“You’re right. Her face and the color of her hair are just slightly different, and her clothes look older. This uniform is the same design that Amemiya was wearing in the courtyard.”

One photo showed a girl smiling brilliantly in front of the school gates, dressed

in a sailor suit.

Another had her holding a hose in one hand, watering the lawn in a white dress.

In another she was seated on a leather couch, wearing an elegant long-sleeved kimono.

A girl who looked very much like Amemiya but different.

“This girl… is Kayano Kujo.”

Tohko was right. The girl in the pictures bore the same expression on her face as the girl I had spoken to in the chemistry lab. It made me feel odd to think that this was the real Kayano.

But why was the wall covered in pictures of her? And why had someone drawn big red *X*’s over her face?

“These numbers are the same as the ones in the notes,” I murmured, turning to the strings of numbers written in red marker.

“We know that Kayano and Aoi used to talk to each other in a number code, so this could be something they wrote. Look, there are two numbers written differently from the others. Plus, after Kayano’s father died, her guardian sent him down to live in a room in the basement. This could be it…”

Tohko looked around the room.

I scanned over everything, too.

There were no windows in the room, which was enclosed by the stained gray walls. For furniture, it had a desk, a table, and a bookshelf. There was a bed. A closet. A door other than the entrance led to a toilet and sink. There was a candelabra on the table with three used candles in it.

“Do you think this was Aoi’s room?”

“But I heard that the entire house was renovated when Kayano died so they could rent it out, which would make it odd if the basement, and even these numbers, had been kept exactly the same.”

“That’s true. So then this room and the numbers on the walls are from after

Hotaru and Kurosaki moved in. So it wasn't Kayano and Aoi who wrote these numbers, but Hotaru and—"

Tohko broke off.

Amemiya and her guardian Kurosaki were the only two people living in the house. There were two styles of handwriting on the wall. That led to only one conclusion.

"Hotaru and Kurosaki… wrote this."

"Why would he have done that?"

Tohko's face clouded over.

"I don't know. I don't know why he followed Hotaru's boyfriends and had them hurt or why he had to restrict her and watch her that closely, either."

"Could Kurosaki be the one she's marrying? He can manage her fortune for now as her guardian, but when she grows up, his role is over. So he might be trying to seize complete control of her fortune by marrying her. If that were the case, he would keep those boys from getting close to her so that he could marry her when she's old enough."

It made a kind of sense when I thought about it.

Tohko's expression grew even darker. "If that's true, then… Ryuto is in serious danger."

Her soft voice was colored by her concern for her brother. Tohko shook her head as if to cast off some dark thought and said, as though to reassure herself, "No, Ryuto wouldn't let anyone get him that easily. He's been making people worry about him for a long time only to come home looking like nothing even happened. It's infuriating how lucky he is."

He was like Tohko that way…

"First we have to think of a way out of here. Can't you call for help on that phone?"

"No, there's no reception underground."

"Then we have to find something to help us escape. Like a hammer or a chain

saw or plastic explosives…”

Tohko opened the desk drawers and peered inside.

“I’m not *quite* sure if they’d have dangerous stuff like that in a *kid’s* room.”

“Does this look like your average kid’s room? Besides, if you look for something expecting to find it, you will.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Look, stop standing around and help me.”

I looked at Tohko’s slender back and her long, busily swaying braids as she issued orders exactly like she always had, and I sighed. *This is just how she is, I guess.* I started searching the room.

We found a lighter, so we lit the candelabra and the room brightened slightly. The photos on the walls caught the light of the flames and reflected the flickering creepily out of the darkness.

Tohko stood in front of the bookshelf and gasped in admiration.

“Look at this! They have a whole collection of MacDonald children’s stories. *At the Back of the North Wind, The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie, The Light Princess, The Golden Key*—my, my, my. This edition is out of print, you know. I can’t believe I’d run into it in a place like this. The conditions are perfect for preserving it, too. It looks de-*lic*-ious.”

Did her love of food trump even a situation like this? She looked like she was about to bend down to the shelf where the old books were lined up and rub her face against them.

“George MacDonald was a Scottish-born fantasy writer of the nineteenth century. He had a big influence on C. S. Lewis, who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and on J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, and he discovered Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and even helped get it published! C. S. Lewis especially was such a huge fan that he featured MacDonald as a character in his stories. He praised MacDonald’s *Phantastes* in his autobiography. Life and death, light and dark coexist in MacDonald’s stories. The instant you turn the page, the magical chain of words echoes like sublime

music and tints the world around us in the rosiness of dawn or the sepia tones of nightfall.

“MacDonald’s stories are like bread baked by fairies. It’s smooth on the tongue and fragrant with a light, creamy texture, and even though you expect it to be like something you’ve eaten before, there’s something completely new about it, and the taste it leaves behind is so subtle!”

As I listened to Tohko pour her heart out, I remembered the book Amemiya had been reading in the library.

That book, the inside of its cover packed with numbers, had also been by MacDonald.

Then Tohko murmured curiously, “What’s this? There’s one book missing. They don’t have *The Day Boy and the Night Girl.* That’s the only thing they need to complete this collection. Oh—but here’s *The Light Princess and Other Stories.* This is a collection put out by a different publisher from the complete works’ edition of *The Light Princess,* and you’d think *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* would have been included with it. Hmm. That’s too bad. They only needed one more book.”

“Amemiya has it.”

Tohko whirled around.

“What? Hotaru has it? How do you know that?”

I told her how I had run into Amemiya in the library. And about how she had wished she could escape to the world of light like the girl in the book, and how sad she had looked when she said it. And then I told her about my conversations with Kayano in the chemistry lab.

“So you weren’t hitting on a girl after all.”

“Kotobuki misunderstood.”

“I see… I’m sorry for doubting you.” Tohko looked meek. “But I can’t believe Hotaru would say something like that! And there’s something about what Kayano told you that bothers me, too…”

She muttered, frowning even more intently. Tohko took each volume of

MacDonald's complete works from the shelf and started flipping through them, checking for writing.

"Hmm. Not here, either, and there's nothing strange about this one. Ack, ack! My eyes are catching on the words! Oh—this part is translated differently from the one I read. Mm, this part looks so good…"

"Try not to eat it."

"Urgh. I'll fight it."

I wondered if she could really be trusted. I was still a little uneasy, but I started searching in the closet.

"By the way, what did you give Maki for telling you where the Kujos' housekeeper worked?"

I had been wondering about that. Tohko was clearly panicked when she answered.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what do you mean?"

"Maki gave you information, right? I'm sure it wasn't free."

"I—I don't think that matters right now…"

"Did you get naked for her?" I asked, throwing a glance behind me.

Tohko whirled around.

"Come on, of course I didn't do that! I just… dressed up like a waitress with a headband that had cat ears on it and carried a tray and said stuff like, 'Have you decided what you want, meow?' That's all!"

My mouth dropped open. Tohko's ears and cheeks flushed visibly.

"Meow? You said that? And wore cat ears?"

"Don't… don't make me *remember* it!"

Tohko spun away from me and shuffled through the books haphazardly.

"Ugh. It's definitely in my top three lifetime humiliations. I will never, ever ask Maki for anything again."

I saw her shoulders and braids quivering. It was obvious how much she

regretted it. And how much Maki had probably enjoyed it…

There were older style dresses hanging in the closet, and as I pushed aside each one, I sighed.

“I’m amazed that you would accept a condition like that, but Maki is taking her joke too far. When I asked her where you’d gone, she grinned and told me you’d gone to see Ellen Dean, which is totally cryptic, and then we find out she’s supposed to be in a love triangle with Amemiya? I can’t figure her out.”

I heard Tohko turn around.

“Ellen Dean? That’s what she told you?”

I twisted my head around and saw a complex expression on Tohko’s face. Something had clearly caught her attention.

“Yes.”

Tohko lowered her eyes and flipped through a book. She seemed to be thinking about something else, though, her eyes never moving over the page.

I pulled a huge flat case out of the closet, and as I tugged at the stiffened zipper, I asked, “What is Ellen Dean anyway? It’s not the housekeeper’s real name, is it?”

The zipper refused to open.

“No, it’s not. Ellen Dean is—”

“Ack!”

The zipper suddenly gave way and the bag fell open grandly to either side, spilling out painting supplies, brushes, and a sketchbook. So it was an art case.

“Oh my gosh! Are you okay?”

Tohko had jumped at my shout, too. I scrambled to gather up the art supplies and then picked up the sketchbook.

“I’m sorry I scared you. It looks like this is Amemiya’s sketchbook. It says ‘Hotaru Amemiya, 1-B’ on the back. Our school doesn’t use letters for the classes, so this must be from middle school.”

Flipping through it, I saw many drawings of flowers. Charcoal sketches had

been colored in with watercolors. It looked like Amemiya was pretty talented: Her pictures were so precise it was like looking at a photograph.

“Oh—”

“What is it?” Tohko came closer and peeked at the sketchbook. Then her eyes widened just as mine had.

It was a drawing of a boy around ten years old with disheveled chestnut-colored hair and eyes like glass beads. His clear eyes were painted brown with a hint of blue over them, a mysterious color that felt isolated.

When I turned another page, there was a picture of the boy slightly older, fourteen or fifteen. I turned the next page. He had grown again and looked seventeen or eighteen now.

“This boy… Could it be Aoi?”

“But this sketchbook belongs to Amemiya, and if she’s the one who drew these pictures, that means she would have known about him in middle school.”

“Hmm… that’s true.”

Tohko closed her eyes and sank into thought.

I turned the next page.

There was a sheet of paper folded in half between the pages. When I opened it, I saw the alphabet. At the top it said “From the K in Kayano,” and beside the letters *K, L, M, N,* and *O* were the numbers one through five.

From the K in Kayano

A B C D E F G H I J

K-1 L-2 M-3 N-4 O-5

P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

I remembered Kayano telling me that her name was a hint, and my heart beat faster.

“Tohko, this looks like the guide to Kayano’s number code.”

“Let me see.”

From the K in Kayano… Tohko must have realized what that meant, too. She took a red marker from a drawer and stabbed it at the paper, writing numbers next to the letters.

K-1 L-2 M-3 N-4 O-5

P-6 Q-7 U-8 R-9 S-10

T-11 U-12 V-13 W-14 X-15…

If K was one, L was two, and M was three, then P was six, Q was seven, and going back to the beginning, A was seventeen and B was eighteen.

At the end, a little apart from everything, the apostrophe was twenty-seven and spaces were twenty-eight.

We filled everything in and then took the paper over to the wall, tracing each number out with a finger and filling in the right value.

17(A)-5(O)-25(I)-28()-1(K)-17(A)-15(Y)-17(A)-4(N)-5(O)—
25(I)-27(’)-3(M)-28-
()-18(B)-17(A)-19(C)-1(K)-28()-1(K)-17(A)-15(Y)-17(A)-4(N)-5(O)—
25(I)-28()-2(L)-5(O)-12(V)-21(E)-28()-15(Y)-5(O)-11(U)-28()-22(F)-5(O)-8(R)-
—
13(W)-21(E)-27(’)-2(L)-2(L)-28()-9(S)-10(T)-17(A)-15(Y)-28()-10(T)-5(O)-23(
—

“I’m back, Kayano—”

A shudder ran through my body, as if cold water had just been dumped over my head.

These words were written by Kurosaki and Amemiya… And the photos of Kayano taped to the wall and the pictures in the sketchbook… When I pieced it all together, an outlandish thought occurred to me.

What if Aoi Kunieda hadn’t died like everyone thought? What if he were still alive? What if he had changed his name and come back for revenge? What if he had made Amemiya a substitute for her mother since she so closely resembled Kayano?

Tohko was staring at the wall, her face ashen. Her lips moved and a strangled

sound made its way out of her.

“You know… I always suspected. I thought I’d read a story like this before… I thought the setup was very similar to the passionate, excrutiating, uncompromising story I knew, but I didn’t have enough to be sure. But… but if he’s Aoi—if he intended to get revenge on the man who married Kayano and everyone around them, *then this story is exactly like—*”

I caught the smell of lamp oil, then gasped and looked at the door.

A thick liquid was seeping in under the firmly shut door.

“Tohko, look!”

“Eek! Wh-what is that? A leak? A flood?!”

“No, it’s lamp oil.”

“What?!”

Someone was on the other side of the door, and we heard the loud splash of liquid hitting the floor.

It was clear what they intended to do, and we paled.

“N-no! Stop!” Tohko shouted, beating against the door, but there was no answer. Instead, we heard a flame burst into life and smelled something burning.

“Ow!” Tohko jerked her hand away from the heat of the doorknob.

“Watch it! Get back, Tohko!”

I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back just as orange flames crawled under the door like a swarm of earthworms.

She brought the tank full of oil to the basement and splashed its contents over the walls and floor.

When she had seen them arrive from a window on the second floor, her heart had tightened and her body had shaken feverishly.

A girl wearing a sailor suit and a boy in a short-sleeved shirt and pants. They looked like the boy and girl she had seen in old photographs.

They’re here!

Aoi and Kayano—!

They had escaped the darkness, deeper than the abyss of space, and come back from the distant past as ghosts to stalk the world of the living!

Aoi and Kayano came in through a door on the first floor, looking for her. They would find her and tear her soul from her body and try to inhabit the freshly emptied vessel.

Thunder pealed, the wind shook the trees to the point of breaking, and huge drops of rain pelted the window.

What could she do? What was there to do? She had to hide. Had to run away.

Her stomach knotted painfully with merciless force; her bony fingers had been fit stiffly together.

Ah, their footsteps were moving away. Going into the room in the basement. To their secret room.

The sky lit up and thunder rumbled. Pierced by the light, she flew from the room as if by divine guidance and ran without an umbrella through the rain, pouring down on the world like a muddy river, to the shed outside, where she caught up a tank of oil.

She would end it all. She would burn them up completely this time, these people who had twisted her destiny.

Trudging barefoot through the tepid mud, she panted wildly, clutching the tank in her arms, and headed toward the basement.

Kill them—kill them—she would kill them both.

As she splashed the oil, she heard a voice crying, “Stop, stop!” It would avail them nothing to beg for mercy. They had died once. There was nothing wrong with sending them back to hell.

She dropped a match onto the oil-soaked floor, and at last she could smile in satisfaction.

“Good-bye, Aoi. Good-bye, Kayano.”

“Nooo!”

Tohko tore the blanket off the bed and tried to beat the flames down with it. I beat at them with a pillow, coughing painfully. There were tears in Tohko’s eyes and she coughed, too.

“This is really bad, Tohko.”

“Agh! They’re going to burn this complete collection of MacDonald children’s books! There’s a new translation out in paperback, but I’ve always dreamed of eating the entire twelve-volume set in hardcover! I refuse to watch something so delicious get turned to charcoal right in front of me!”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself burning to a crisp instead?!”

Why was I making jabs at Tohko at a time like this?

The small room filled with smoke, which stung my eyes and made them water. I was coughing too much, hurting my throat. I couldn’t breathe.

Was I going to die here with Tohko?

Tohko was still fighting to put out the fire. Swinging the blanket down with a desperate look in her eye, she yelled, “Nooo! They can’t burn up! Books aren’t any good when they’re well-done! You can’t cook them that long!”

I was utterly astounded by her devotion to food.

All at once, we heard the sound of several pairs of footsteps rushing down the stairs, accompanied by a jumble of sounds and voices, like an avalanche of pounding water, and the sounds of a jet lifting off and people shouting.

The door opened, and I was dumbfounded to see Maki appear, holding a fire extinguisher and wearing her school uniform.

Why was she here? Was she stalking Tohko or something?

Tohko’s eyes popped out, too.

Maki turned the fire extinguisher to the burning floor. The chemicals spewed out with a loud *bwoooosh!* and deposited a white foam.

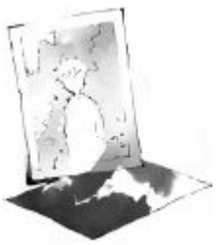
Behind Maki were two adult men, working efficiently to put out the fire. One of them looked familiar. It was the guy who’d driven the limousine when Maki

came to get us from the police station two days ago.

When they'd put out the fire, Maki told the other man to bring down a first aid kit and towels; then she looked at us. She quirked her sensual lips into a bewitching smile.

"That was a little close. Now how do you intend to show your appreciation?"

Chapter 7 – The Tale of the Famished Spirit



Night had not yet fallen. We were in the workroom in the music hall and finally felt like ourselves again.

Takamizawa, who had helped to rescue us, brought us tea in thin, white porcelain cups. He was tall without a hair out of place, and he wore a well-tailored suit. Apparently he worked for Maki's grandfather. He had also been the one to bring a first aid kit from the first floor and treat Tohko's burnt hands.

He gave a crisp bow and left the room, leaving only Tohko, Maki, and myself.

Tohko was hugging the sketchbook she'd brought from Amemiya's house to her chest, sitting in a metal folding chair, looking down at the ground with a tight-lipped expression on her face. Her right hand was bandaged.

Tohko had been like this the entire time in the car, her face tense as she took the student handbook out of her bag and looked through it, then furrowing her brow even more, all in total silence.

In contrast, Maki was in a buoyant mood.

"The tea he makes is top-notch. You need to try it. What's wrong? You're so sullen. Well, I suppose you must be in shock. You *were* almost roasted like a Christmas goose."

Without lifting her head, Tohko murmured, "Hey, Maki… How come you were at Hotaru's house?"

Holding her cup of tea in one hand, Maki leaned back against a windowsill and smiled faintly.

"I told you in the car. Since you two were running all over the place about this thing with Hotaru Amemiya, it made me wonder. I decided to do some

investigating of my own. When I got to Amemiya's house, I saw a window was broken and the room was in total chaos and there was smoke billowing up from the basement, which caught me by surprise. I'm just glad I got there in time."

"… Is that really all?"

Tohko set the sketchbook on the table and rose to her feet.

"A girl in Hotaru's class said that Hotaru had stolen your boyfriend. I had no idea you and she were in a love triangle."

"Seriously. This is the first I've heard of it myself." Maki shrugged it off with a strange expression. "I wonder how these crazy rumors get started."

"You said that in middle school you and Hotaru were in the art club together, but you didn't know each other very well. But you actually knew about Hotaru and Kayano and *who Kurosaki really is*, didn't you?"

Tohko's and Maki's eyes locked.

Tohko's clear, intelligent black eyes and Maki's brown eyes, usually sparkling with superiority, stabbed at each other.

I gulped and watched their confrontation.

"I don't know what you mean, Tohko," Maki replied, her lips carved into a smile. The haughty, formidable look on her face was exactly the same as the one she'd used on me the day before. It was no easy task to get the truth out of this girl. Did Tohko have any chance against her?

After staring at Maki for a few moments, Tohko started walking.

Her shoes clicking on the floor and her braids swinging, she stopped in front of a bookshelf. She pulled a book out with long, slender fingers and read the title in a strong voice.

"*Wuthering Heights*—Emily Brontë's problematic work of the nineteenth century, right in the middle of the Victorian era. *Wuthering* refers to the violence of a storm blowing across hills that can offer nothing to oppose the passing rain and wind, as well as to the sound they make as they rage over the land."

I was confused. What was the connection between Maki and that book?

With the book still in hand, Tohko began to talk, her words like a river overrunning its dam.

“The story begins in 1801 with a misanthropic gentleman named Lockwood who has grown weary of life in the city and is visiting a stout manor on a windblown hill. Lockwood listens to his cook Nelly tell the story of a man and woman from Wuthering Heights and the oppressive history of love and hatred between the people around him.

“In the summer of 1771, at the beginning of the harvest, the master of the house, named Earnshaw, has just come back from business in Liverpool, where he picked up a small boy. Dirty and dressed in rags, the boy is given the name of Earnshaw’s oldest son who has passed away—Heathcliff—and he begins living at the mansion at Wuthering Heights.

“Earnshaw also had a daughter, Catherine, and his younger son and heir, Hindley. Hindley is jealous of Heathcliff, who has become the chief object of his father’s affection, and he begins to hold darkly warped feelings toward him. But Catherine befriended Heathcliff immediately. The two would go out to the moors surrounding the house nearly every day to play. It was as if one soul were shared between two people; they were utterly inseparable.

“But six years later, Earnshaw died and Hindley took everything from Heathcliff. He thoroughly scorned him, despised him, abused him, and treated him like a slave.

“A large gulf developed between Catherine and Heathcliff’s stations, one a fine lady and the other a servant.

“During all this, Catherine makes the acquaintance of Edgar, the heir to the Linton family, which lives in Thrushcross Grange at the foot of Wuthering Heights. The son of a good family and indulgently educated, Edgar is transfixed by Catherine’s beauty, and Catherine accepts his advances and decides to marry him. When he finds out about it, Heathcliff experiences such despair that he disappears from Wuthering Heights.”

As I listened to Tohko, the rhythm of her voice like the moaning wind gusting over the moors, I thought of Kayano and Aoi.

The young boy acquired on a trip, the manor on a windswept hill, the strong-

minded little girl who lived there—the boy and girl uniting their souls and spending all their time together, but the little girl's father who had watched over them dies and everything changes.

The boy becomes a servant, and because she is a fine lady, the girl can no longer speak to him casually. Then the little girl grows up to be beautiful and betrays the boy, becoming the wife of a rich young man.

The story Tohko told of Heathcliff and Catherine was exactly like Aoi and Kayano's story!

"Three years later in the autumn of 1783, Heathcliff has acquired property and tidied himself up and he returns to Wuthering Heights. He pretends to be a placid gentleman on the surface, but he has begun his revenge and first drives Catherine's brother Hindley into a trap, snatching the estate of Wuthering Heights and all his property from him. Then he seduces Edgar's younger sister Isabella, Catherine's sister-in-law, and elopes with her.

"Catherine begins to lose her mind, and after refusing to eat, she falls ill and dies giving birth to a baby girl. In losing Catherine, who was the other half of his soul, Heathcliff is cast down even further into a pit of raging solitude and despair: He is transformed into a demon bent on revenge.

"After Hindley's death, Heathcliff takes over the house at Wuthering Heights and treats Hindley's son Hareton like a servant, never teaching him to read or write. Then he plots to marry the son his wife, Isabella, bears, Linton, to Catherine's daughter, who is given the same name as her mother.

"Swept up in Heathcliff's evil schemes and lured to Wuthering Heights, the younger Catherine is imprisoned in the manor and forced to marry Linton. While she's trapped there, her father, Edgar, breathes his last after an illness and Catherine's husband, Linton, inherits all of her property. However, Linton is sickly and soon dies, and his father, Heathcliff, gains control of the manors and property of both the Earnshaw and Linton families, and the younger Catherine, now a widow, lives with him in the house at Wuthering Heights."

The story of people complexly intertwined, entangled, hurting one another, and seizing whatever they can from each other—Tohko related this daunting story with such rawness and heart-wrenching pain that I felt as if it had actually

happened. Then the figures of the people I knew overshadowed the story one after another, fitting together like puzzle pieces.

Kurosaki had married Amemiya's aunt.

After Amemiya's aunt and father died, he became her guardian and took control of her father's company. Then he got rid of the house Amemiya had grown up in and moved to Kayano's old house on the hill to live there with Amemiya. He had prevented anyone from getting close to her, using every conceivable means.

Why had Kurosaki done such things?

What was his goal?

"This story is very similar to the situation in which Hotaru finds herself. At first, I didn't pick up on it, either. I needed a Heathcliff in order to declare that her story was *Wuthering Heights.* Someone seeking revenge with that same unflagging energy, like an evil spirit of old—someone who radiated with intensity, like the raging winds gusting over Wuthering Heights.

"Hotaru was nothing more than an anorexic girl living with her uncle who was deeply troubled by something. Even after I met with the housekeeper and found out about Aoi, I couldn't be certain. Aoi had left the story early on, and I thought he was dead.

"But if Aoi was still alive—if he changed his name, changed his position, and came back for revenge…"

Tohko paused and let out a breath and then started up again.

"According to what Konoha heard from the woman who works at Kurosaki's company, Kurosaki's eyes are weak and so he always wears lightly tinted sunglasses, and his hair is dyed light brown. She said he had black hair before he took over, but he bleached his hair right as he assumed control, and the board members disapproved. But was Kurosaki's hair black originally? Maybe his real hair color is brown, and he just stopped dying it black. And he might wear sunglasses because he doesn't want people to see the color of his eyes."

Tohko wasn't a detective. She was a book girl who simply read and used her imagination.

So this wasn't a deduction; it was a fantasy.

But the sound of Tohko's voice and her ideas gripped my heart and were pulling me along in their wake.

"Aoi was of mixed parentage, and I heard that his hair and eye color was lighter. You know his name means 'blue'? Apparently Kayano named him that because from a certain angle, she could see a hint of blue in his brown eyes.

"If Kurosaki is in fact Aoi, then he might try to change his appearance by dyeing his hair and wearing sunglasses so people who knew him wouldn't recognize him.

"And if my guess is right and Kurosaki is Aoi, that makes him Heathcliff and Hotaru is Catherine Earnshaw's daughter, Catherine Linton, and the setup of *Wuthering Heights* is complete!"

She fixed her clear black eyes on Maki.

Her voice still echoing in the workroom, Tohko pressed Maki further. "The reason I didn't recognize the plot was because you, Maki, already knew about it. Konoha told me that when I went to see the housekeeper, you told him that I'd gone to see Ellen Dean. In *Wuthering Heights,* Ellen Dean is the housekeeper who worked for both the Earnshaws and the Lintons, but everyone calls her Nelly.

"She's also the narrator who observed the entire story and untangled the complex drama of Heathcliff and Catherine's love-hate relationship and explained it for Lockwood!

"When Konoha told me you called the housekeeper Ellen Dean, I started to understand a lot of things. The burned notes and the notes with splatters of blood on them—you were the one who put them into our mailbox, weren't you? Maki?"

Tohko opened the hardcover book in her hands and started turning the pages quickly, as if she was speed-reading.

"All the words in those notes appear in *Wuthering Heights.* 'The herd of possessed swine'—that's something Lockwood yells at Heathcliff during a visit to Wuthering Heights when he's set upon by the dogs they kept in the house. 'The

herd of possessed swine could have had no worse spirits in them than those animals of yours.' It's a reference to a parable in the Bible, and there are many other words and phrases in *Wuthering Heights* that trace back to the Bible.

" 'I shall make you swallow the carving-knife'—that's a line Hindley directs at Nelly when he comes home drunk. 'A bird of bad omen' is something Nelly tells Isabella when she confesses that she's fallen in love with Heathcliff, and Heathcliff tells Nelly he'll be painting the walls with Hindley's blood after he's taken some abuse from Hindley. 'Its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons' is something Catherine says after she's descended into madness and pulls the feathers out of her pillow and starts arranging them on her bed.

"And 'I'm come home'—those are the words of *Catherine's ghost* tapping on the wall with her tiny hand, begging to be let inside on stormy nights. After that, Heathcliff opens the windows and bellows into the darkness that swirls with wind and snow, 'Come in! Come in!' "

Tohko snapped the book shut.

Maki had a smile on her face. There was dark amusement in it, as if she had been waiting for the moment when Tohko would denounce her, and as she surrendered, it seemed a devilish joy glinted in her eyes.

"You would have easily been able to pull off the business with the ghost in the book club. You were the one who first revealed that Hotaru was cursed. Remember? And you told me where the housekeeper worked, because you thought that if you had me investigating Kayano, I wouldn't think about Hotaru, right?

"But then when you rescued us from the basement, you told Takamizawa to go get the first aid kit and towels. Not go and *look for*, but go and *get.* Isn't that a strange way to ask for something in a house you've never been to before? I assumed you had them in your car, but Takamizawa got a first aid kit and towels from a room on the first floor and started treating me too quickly for that. It seemed like you had a pretty good idea where you could find everything in the house.

"The girl in Hotaru's class said that a tall man in a suit picked her up in a car. And that people had seen you riding in that man's car, too, Maki."

“Was that Takamizawa by any chance? Those crazy rumors about you and Hotaru being rivals started because you were in contact with Hotaru through him, right? You’ve been to that mansion on the hill before, haven’t you?

Tohko peppered her with questions.

“You know, there’s a theory that Nelly skillfully manipulated Heathcliff and Catherine and that it was she who wove together the tragedy in *Wuthering Heights*. That it was all some scheme of hers. If you read *Wuthering Heights* from that perspective, everything takes on a new form. Nelly criticizes Heathcliff to Isabella by asking, ‘Is Mr. Heathcliff a man?… And if not, is he a devil?’ but even he is nothing more than a puppet she manipulated. Nelly watched everything, knew everything, and even occasionally changed the course of the story without anyone realizing it. You were Hotaru’s Ellen Dean, weren’t you, Maki?”

“What if I said I didn’t know?”

Maki looked at Tohko, the smile still on her face.

The wind and rain had abated and the workroom, lit by the fading light of sunset, was filled with a sacred silence. As she stood against the windowsill, Maki’s hair sparkled gold, illuminated by a pure light from outside.

Tohko frowned ever so slightly.

“I wouldn’t believe you. You gave this book girl too many hints, Maki.”

Then Tohko’s face became serenely dignified again, and she returned the book to the shelf. She approached the covered canvases and whisked away the sheet that covered one of them.

Drawn on the long rectangular canvas was the picture I had seen the other day.

It was a hilly landscape at night, slathered in blacks and blues, looking like a foreign country, like another world. Heavy clouds loomed in the sky, and a harsh wind gusted over the grass and trees, bending them in its wake. I could hear the raging wind and the pounding of the falling rain, stirring my heart up wildly; it was a crazed landscape, heavy and dark, that seemed to bellow.

Tohko stood beside the painting and crisply declared, “This is *Wuthering Heights.*”

Maki closed her eyes in apparent resignation.

“That’s right. I didn’t think you had read *Wuthering Heights*… In any case, that ghost you’re so afraid of originated in that story.”

Tohko had fixed a stern gaze on Maki, but that made her jump and threw her into a panic.

“How did you know I was afraid?”

Maki gave Tohko a look and then winked.

“Because I love you.”

Tohko’s eyes bugged out and she turned red. Then she pouted and looked a little sulky before smoothing her face into something more serious.

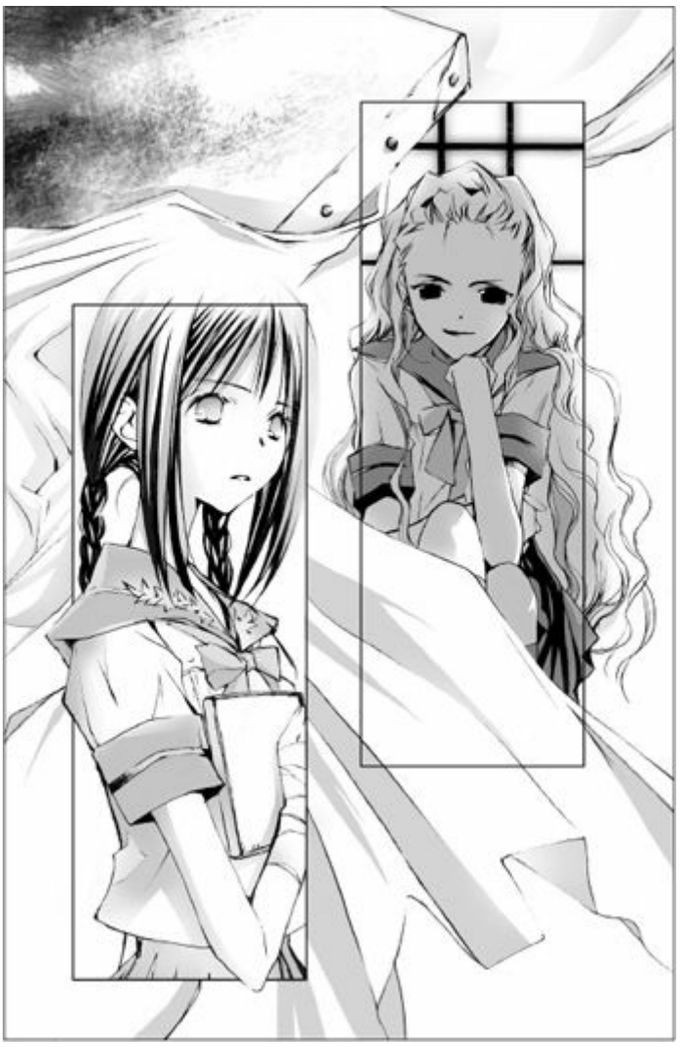
“I’m a book girl—I love all the stories the world has to offer. No matter the book, I will taste it and drink it down.”

Maki probably didn’t realize that Tohko wasn’t speaking metaphorically, but in fact meant exactly what she’d said. Maki’s lips twitched into a small smile. It wasn’t her usual haughty smile: This one was kinder and almost lonely.

“I suppose that’s it, then. I underestimated you, book girl.”

Tohko’s face grew gloomy. She scrunched her eyebrows together and her eyes clouded, as if she was suppressing some kind of pain. She moved closer to Maki and asked, “What is Hotaru trying to do? You know, don’t you, Maki? And where is Ryuto?”

Maki replied, “That all-too-feisty boy is being treated at the hospital of one of my grandfather’s friends. He was stabbed nine times in the stomach, but he’s still alive at least.”



When she was small, her mother would often take her by the hand, and they would set out for the mansion on the hill.

The wind never stopped buffeting the house, and the trees surrounding it leaned in odd directions. Whenever she opened her window, the blast of air made her curtains leap up and tore around the room like an unbroken horse in the field, fluttering the pages of a book left on a table.

“The wind is too strong here. Let’s go to the room downstairs,” her mother would say and lead her to the gray room in the basement.

“This is a secret room, but I’ll tell you about it.”

A secret she would share with her mother—her mother’s innocent smile and the sweet, somehow immoral promise in her offer stirred the girl’s heart and made her feel slightly uneasy, as if she was standing on an inescapable precipice.

“I can’t tell Daddy, either?”

“That’s right.”

Her mother rested a thin white finger on her lips.

“A long time ago, Mommy was friends with a little boy, and we used to play in here. We read books and talked to each other and wrote each other letters.”

“You wrote each other letters? But you were in the same room.”

“Yes, we did. We used a secret code that we made up. You can still see it on the wall.”

Her mother pointed at the wall, where a great many numbers were written.

They were like a magic spell, and she pored over each one, whispering them to herself.

“17, 28, 18, 21, 2, 5, 4, 23, 9, 28, 10, 5, 28, 1, 28, 1, 28, 18, 21, 2, 5, 4, 23, 9, 28, 10, 5, 28, 17—10, 5, 23, 21, 10, 24, 21, 8, 28, 22, 5, 8, 21, 12, 21, 8—… What do they mean?”

Her mother chuckled.

“I won’t tell even you that. It’s the secret I share with him. Mommy left a lot of codes at school, too. Maybe if that little boy comes back someday, he’ll see Mommy’s messages.”

“Did he go somewhere?”

“Yes, Mommy made him mad and he went far away, and I don’t know when he’ll come back…”

Her mother spoke sadly and hugged her tightly. Her shoulders trembled and she seemed to be crying, so the girl asked her nothing more about him.

After a while her mother raised her face and stroked the girl’s hair; then she smiled at her with red-rimmed eyes.

“All right, I’ll read you a book. It’s called *The Day Boy and the Night Girl.* The little boy and I liked this book very much.”

Who had this boy been that had made her mother so sad?

If they were such good friends, where had he gone?

One day her mother whispered that she had a secret and showed her a few photographs.

One was of a young boy a little older than herself with light brown hair and eyes like smoky quartz with a slight bluish cast. And then the boy in another one, a little older now, dressed in a middle school uniform.

“Doesn’t he have pretty eyes?”

She thought the boy’s eyes looked very lonely.

And sad, like a stray cat with no friends.

She was sure that he must have loved her mother.

Something in her heart wavered.

It was a puzzling emotion, forlorn and secret like the beating of a waterbird’s wings.

Her father was a kind, peaceful man. Her aunt was beautiful and refined.

They both loved her with all their hearts and showered her with their affection like clear water.

“You look so much like your mother. Your eyes are exactly the same.”

“Yes, your mouth and nose both come from her side. You’re going to be very beautiful when you grow up, just like she was.”

“I’m so proud: My little girl is starting middle school. The uniform suits you. It reminds me of when I first met your mother.”

“I remember how you fell in love with Kayano the very first time you saw her.”

“It’s all right. I have these episodes all the time. I’ll be able to leave the hospital soon. How could I die before I’ve seen you on your wedding day? Your mother was beautiful in her wedding dress. I was so happy when I married her, I thought I might float up into the sky. I’m sure a white dress and veil will suit you just as well.”

“Let me stand in for your mother when the time comes. Okay? Promise your old aunt that.”

“Dinner is ready, miss! You eat up now.”

“Thank you!”

“How is it, miss?”

“It’s very good!”

“I’m glad. There’s plenty left for seconds.”

The loving gazes of her father and aunt.

The kind housekeeper who cooked so well.

The house she grew up in was as warm and unsullied as heaven must be, and her favorite flowers bloomed everywhere in the garden. The wind was gentle and the colorful green leaves of the trees never blew away.

She knew that *he* would have brought a storm to this paradise, would have shaken the trees and plucked apart all the flowers.

So she kept him a secret from her father and her aunt and the kind

housekeeper.

She never opened her sketchbook in the house.

His injuries must have still hurt. Ryuto sprawled out in the backseat of Maki's car, wearing a shirt and pants over the bandages that circled his stomach. He was breathing raggedly.

"Nngh—"

Tohko, Ryuto, Maki, and I were going to Amemiya's house.

It had grown impenetrably dark outside, and lights flashed in the windows of the car before disappearing.

After Maki admitted to giving Amemiya advice, we had all gone to the hospital where Ryuto was being treated.

Ryuto was in a hospital bed, shouting to be let out. When Tohko saw him, her tension dissolved. She broke down and scrunched up her face as tears welled in her eyes.

Then she walked up to Ryuto, who was staring at her wide-eyed, and whacked him hard on the head with her fist.

"How can you keep making us worry like this all the time?! Your luck isn't going to save you forever, you know!"

"Owww. But no, I need to get to Hotaru. She's trying to get revenge on Kurosaki. I have to stop her!"

In the car, Ryuto told us everything that had happened, letting out a groan every so often, his face twisted in agony.

The day Ryuto and I went to Amemiya's house, Ryuto had held Amemiya while she sobbed, but I couldn't bear to watch them. After I'd left the estate, Ryuto had urged her to come to his house.

You shouldn't stay here. I'll find a place you can live without being scared. Until then, you should stay at my house. My dad's gone, so it's just my mom and big sister, and Mom doesn't care what I do.

"But she got spooked suddenly and pushed me away, and then she started

cryin'. She was shakin' real bad, but she said she couldn't just leave the house like that without tellin' anyone. Then she got real worked up and seemed confused. She started babbling about how a ghost was going to come, how she wasn't supposed to eat anythin', how she was a ghost, how she'd made a promise to her mom so she had to keep it a secret, how she wasn't her mom… All kinds of stuff."

Ryuto's forehead knit in pain and he groaned. His breathing seemed labored, and he repeatedly sucked in a breath and then hissed it out again, almost panting.

Tohko watched him, her heart breaking.

"Nngh… Durin' all that, she blurted out that she was gonna get revenge on Kurosaki and that since she'd turned sixteen, she could do it. She said Maki was helpin' her… Hey, are you the same Maki who told Hotaru that she could get married once she turned sixteen and then Kurosaki wouldn't be her guardian anymore?"

His eyes clouded with sweat, Ryuto glared bitterly at Maki. Maki regarded her reflection in the windshield with a languid expression. Without turning back to look at him, she replied.

"Yes. I told her that. I said if she was interested, I would find someone for her in the Himekura family. She's so rich there would be plenty of guys interested in becoming her husband. Of course, I wouldn't let her do or say anything to Kurosaki. I told her I would protect her and her husband with the prestige of the Himekuras."

Why had Maki told Amemiya that?

Why would she ally with Amemiya in the first place? How long had she been involved in this situation?

I had a ton of questions, but then when the others started talking about Amemiya getting married, I listened intently so I wouldn't miss a word they said.

"Yeah, Hotaru mentioned that. She said even Kurosaki couldn't lay a hand on you. She told me there was no other way for her to be free of him and that it would be her revenge on him.

“I shook her and told her to forget about gettin’ married. I told her I would protect her, but Hotaru wouldn’t listen and she tried to leave. I tried to stop her, and then she… grabbed a piece of broken dish off the floor and stabbed me in the stomach.

“She… apologized when she did it. But not just once. Tears were streamin’ down her face while she apologized, stabbin’ me over and over… Even when I fell to my knees and collapsed on the floor, she kept stabbin’ me. Like she was possessed.”

I could picture the scene vividly. My throat tightened, and my hair stood on end.

Frail, subdued Amemiya, tears pouring from her eyes as she swung a piece of broken dish over her head and brought it down again and again into Ryuto’s stomach as red seeped across it. I couldn’t hold back a shudder.

“… I was right when I guessed she was a dangerous woman. The worst part is that she didn’t gut me because of how she felt about me. Nngh—if she’d stabbed me because she was truly in love with me, then I would have welcomed my death.”

Ryuto smiled bitterly. A moment later, Tohko was yanking on his ear.

“Don’t talk like that! You got off lucky to walk away from getting stabbed that viciously!”

“Owww, Tohko! I’m hurt. Can’t you restrain yourself a little?”

“Since when do you care?!” Tohko pouted, tears welling in her eyes again.

Luckily the shard Amemiya picked up had been a small one, so none of Ryuto’s injuries were life threatening, and when Maki and the others ran in, they had taken him to the hospital.

“Amemiya called me, actually. She told me she’d killed Ryuto and asked me what she should do. She sounded detached. She’s psychologically unbalanced, so she’s in a dangerous state right now. She told me she was starting to forget where and who she was. She couldn’t even remember her name. This is the first time she’s ever stabbed someone, though. It caught me off guard.

“So I had her watched, so something like that wouldn’t happen again. I wanted to move her to an apartment where I could keep an eye on her, but she said she didn’t want to leave that house. And just as I feared, this time she locked you two in the basement and tried to incinerate you.”

Tohko wasn’t surprised; perhaps she’d already dreamed up that possibility. And at this point, I understood that Amemiya was probably capable of pulling off something like that.

Because Amemiya also had the strong and uninhibited Kayano Kujo inside her, who I had met in the chemistry lab.

Maki related the facts in a detached tone.

“As you’ve surmised, Tamotsu Kurosaki is Aoi Kunieda, the boy who lived in Kayano’s home. He died abroad, but he made some money getting mixed up in dirty business, so he bought a new identity and came back to Japan.”

Kurosaki’s objective had been getting revenge against Kayano for tossing him aside, but Kayano had already passed away by then so he fixed his sights on her daughter, Amemiya.

The disappointment of losing the woman he loved and despised in equal measure, who had been the other half of his soul, must have driven him into a tempest of madness.

Imagining how he must have felt made my brain burn.

He had sold his soul to the devil and sent time flowing backward.

He acquired the house he and Kayano had once lived in and readied the basement room, had decorated it as it had once been and re-created their secret room, and even managed to bring Kayano back to life.

He made her daughter, who so resembled her, a proxy and taught her her mother’s speech, expressions, and manner, crafting her into the very image of Kayano.

In that basement room, Amemiya was forced to play the part of her mother against her will. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t be fed. The only thing Amemiya could do in that place was to live as Kayano Kujo.

Amemiya must have been the one to draw red *X*'s over Kayano's photos.

What emotions must have driven her to painstakingly draw an *X* over her mother's face in each photo?

What emotions had driven her to write the notes and leave them in our mailbox?

help

hate you

stay away

a ghost

In the hopelessness of her situation, Amemiya had slowly lost her mind. She began to assume the role of Kayano Kujo even when she left the house. It must have felt like Kayano had taken over her body.

Wouldn't she become Kayano completely one day, and Hotaru would disappear?

Even if she feared that, there was nothing she could do to stop it. Her extreme hunger and suffering blurred the boundary between reality and fantasy, and in her eyes, Tohko and I had seemed to be the spirits of Kayano and Aoi returned from the grave. That was why she had shut us in the basement and tried to set us on fire.

As she listened to Maki's story, Tohko hugged herself and shuddered.

I, too, bit down on my lip and squeezed my eyes closed.

I was dizzy; I felt like I was on the verge of collapsing.

Tamotsu Kurosaki had done something truly awful.

He wanted to go back to the past and do it all over again. I had wished for that once, too. I had sworn that if I could get Miu back, I would do anything—even sell my soul to the devil.

But to do it, Kurosaki had stolen a girl's future and erased her personality.

Even though that still wouldn't bring the real Kayano back. Even though it helped no one.

With some difficulty, Tohko murmured, "Tell me one more thing, Maki. Did Kurosaki collect those books that were down in the basement?"

"… I don't know. But I heard they used to belong to Kayano."

"I see…"

Tohko's eyelashes drooped, and she fell into a reverie, pressing an index finger to her lips. That was a habit Tohko had while reading—something she did when she was utterly absorbed in her interior world.

Ryuto glared at Maki, a look brimming with animosity usually reserved for a

team of villains.

“What were you plannin’ by keepin’ me under surveillance and stoppin’ me from seein’ Hotaru? Huh, Maki? What were you tryin’ to make Hotaru do?”

Tohko looked up and turned an uneasy gaze on Maki.

Maki looked back at Ryuto haughtily, and when she spoke, her voice was hard.

“The reason I didn’t take you out of the hospital was because I didn’t want you to interfere with her. I only gave her advice, only gave her what help she asked of me. I’ve never once manipulated what she wants.”

Then Maki’s eyes filled with gloom and she murmured, “There isn’t much time left between her and Kurosaki. Kurosaki had already made his decision, so she had to act, too. Whatever effect it had on her, she had to bring things to an end with Kurosaki.”

Anxiety shot through my heart.

The last time I’d seen her in the chemistry lab, Kayano had said something similar.

If half of your soul has committed a sin and been cast into hell, isn’t that the duty of the half that’s left behind? It would be wrong for only one part to be saved and go to heaven.

What was Amemiya planning?

What did Maki mean, there wasn’t much time left between them? Saeko, the girl who worked at Kurosaki’s company, had told us that Kurosaki was throwing up his food. Could he be seriously ill? Was that why I’d seen Amemiya at the hospital? She wasn’t planning to commit suicide with him, was she?

Ryuto growled.

“Where is she?! Where are we goin’?!”

Maki answered with a grim look, “The church. She’s having the ceremony there next week.”

“I have wonderful news. I want you to congratulate me and really mean it. I’m marrying Takashi.”

She had smiled brightly that day while she ripped his heart into pieces.

"Why are you upset? Aren't you going to be happy for me? If I married you, I couldn't live in a white mansion with a pool or ride in limousines or keep a Yorkshire terrier as a pet, could I?"

Why? Why was she marrying another man? Was she telling me to be happy about that? Why was she smiling? Why? *Why?* Was she tossing me aside? Even though our souls were one and would never be separated, she was slicing them apart with her own hand. How could she do something so cruel? For money? For pleasure? For vanity?

How am I supposed to watch her give herself to another man!

On a stormy night, he disappeared from the house. He had despised her ever since. He hoped only for vengeance against her and crawled up from the depths of hell blazing with dark flames to return to the world.

But she had died and left him behind. He was assaulted by a despair even greater than before.

Then he had learned of her daughter, and when he saw her… he knew how he would get back the time he had lost.

The girl was a living reflection of her. If he could get hold of her…

He made meticulous plans, entering her father's company, pursuing him with the guile of a snake and the ferocity of a wolf to his death. Her father's heart had a defect, and when the man removed his sunglasses and quirked his mouth into a smile, her father was stunned. His eyes bulged out and he tore at his chest; then he passed away with a look of anguish in his hospital bed.

His sister, the woman who had become the man's wife, knew what he had done to her brother and it unhinged her. "Stay away! Devil! Stay away! Stay away!!" she had shouted, backing frantically away, until her foot slipped and she toppled into the dark of the ocean.

Everything had gone exactly as he planned.

He had gone back in time and had "Kayano," his betrayer, firmly in his grasp.

By controlling her food, he took away even her will to resist him and chained

her spirit. Once he had her under his control, “she” never contradicted him or turned her back on him.

He had believed that, this time, life would go on in that way for eternity.

So how had this happened?

There was no time.

He had received a letter. She had sent it to him. She was to be married in a week, and so she wanted to see him once more before then.

His rage and despair buffeted him like a storm blowing over the hills, tightening his throat. *Will she betray me again?! Will another man’s arms embrace her?!*

There was no time.

He crumpled up the letter.

There was no time.

His stomach was as barren as moorland, but a hellish nausea welled up inside him.

There was no time.

His throat prickled, and his stomach knotted. A glob of blood he spit up made a red stain on the floor.

He scrubbed roughly at his mouth with the back of his hand and staggered from the room.

To see her. To turn time back once more.

She knew that there was not much time left between them.

There was no time.

If she fled from this moment, she would never be able to hurt him.

Fingers filled with malice clawed at the walls of her wasted stomach.

She felt a chill, as if poison was being slathered over her body, but her mind was on fire.

There was no time.

She would have revenge. On him. On him who had destroyed her paradise, who had surely killed her aunt and father. She would strike a blow that he could not escape.

What she had been unable to do at twelve, she would be able to do at sixteen.

There was no time.

In the cool, silent chapel of the church, swathed in a white dress, her face covered by a translucent veil, she awaited his arrival.

In her heart she hid the knife she would use to stab him. She laced her thin fingers together and dug her nails into the backs of her hands.

She had been given a book when she turned sixteen. She had burned it before coming here. She had also erased the numbers written in the chemistry lab.

There was no time.

Her throat prickled and her stomach knotted.

"25-28-2-5-12-21-28-15-5-11"

***No*.**

"25-28-17-2-13-17-15-9-28-19-17-8-21-20"

Stop.

"2-5-5-1-28-17-10-28-3-21-28-4-5-10-28-3-5-10-24-21-8"

No! No!

"25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4"

"25-28-13-17-4-10-28-10-5-28-18-21-28-13-25-10-24-28-17-5-25"

Please, go away! Just go away!

"25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-19-17-8-21-28-25-22-28-25-10-27-9-28-17-28-9-25-4"

"25-28-17-19-19-21-6-10-28-10-24-21-28-6-11-4-25-9-24-3-21-4-10"

No! Not me!

“17-5-25-28-25-9-28-17-2-2-28-25-28-13-17-4-10”

“19-5-3-21-28-18-17-19-1-28-17-5-25”

“15-5-11-28-17-8-21-28-3-21-28-25-28-17-3-28-15-5-11”

Oh, Father… Father…

“25-28-13-25-2-2-28-2-5-12-21-28-17-5-25-28-22-5-8-21-12-21-8”

I hate him. Hate him.

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

“25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4”

The ghost inside her was running wild. She pressed down on her stomach, which seared with pain, and let out a moan as she slipped to the floor. Doubled over, her ears caught the cold sound of footsteps.

She mustered all the strength left in her body and stood up on unsteady legs.

This—*this*—was truly the end.

Soon their two worlds would be completely severed. He had dammed up the flow of time so desperately, but he could no longer stop it from rushing on in a torrent toward annihilation. *When the time came,* she would never see him again, never be touched by him again. She would even lose her ability to hate him. That was why it had to be now—now!

Her gaze rushed like a storm down the aisle between the pews, illuminated

by a candelabra. The main doors opened, and a man wearing a suit and lightly tinted sunglasses appeared.

The man who had shut her away in darkness and stolen light from her! The murderer of her aunt and father!

Flames burned in her eyes and a searing pain tormented her.

She wanted only a little bit more time—just a bit more—until she exacted her revenge on him. Just a bit more.

“Take off your sunglasses, Aoi. Next week, I’ll be married here in this dress. I want you to congratulate me.”

Chapter 8 – The Girl in the Storm

When we opened the door to the chapel, Amemiya was standing in front of the altar, wearing a pearl-white wedding dress. Both hands were wrapped in bandages. The moonlight shining through the stained glass windows illuminated her thin body like a spotlight.

I saw a tall man in a suit nearby, and my heart leaped into my throat.

Was that Tamotsu Kurosaki? From where we stood, I could only see how tall he was.

“What a wonderful feeling. Once I have a husband, you will no longer be my guardian and you’ll lose everything. You messed up my entire life. You murderer! You stole my family from me! You deserve to suffer and despair! You deserve to be cast into hell!”

Her tiny white face radiated frailty—but the impact of the tempestuous curses she flung from her thin lips struck me as if taking the full force of a gale head-on.

The night she had first met Ryuto, Amemiya had been standing on a swing, alone in a raging storm, pumping the swing with wild energy.

I imagined that she must have looked much like this that night and when she’d grabbed a broken dish and brutally driven it into Ryuto’s stomach.

It was the ravening face of someone who had descended into madness. Her skin was ghoulishly pale, and rage, suffering, and hatred flashed in her eyes like lightning tearing open the sky.

Now at last she was unleashing the storm that had howled through her heart unbeknownst to anyone, which had been held back and sealed in for so long. She hurled it, with all the ferocity of a life forfeit, at the man she most despised in this world.

The fractured emotions displayed by Hotaru Amemiya—just one little girl—overwhelmed us and left us mute and paralyzed like people trembling before nature's fury in the very heart of a storm, nothing more than victims to its caprice.

Tamotsu Kurosaki, despite his long tyranny over Amemiya, was no exception. Now the roles of master and subject were reversed, and he stood frozen, his back to us.

"My mother didn't love you even a little bit. She thought of you as nothing more than a servant, and she mocked you. 'I love you, Aoi,' 'I'll never leave you, Aoi'—all those things you forced me to say were lies! They were your own delusions! Even when I was saying I loved you, in my heart I was cursing you, wishing you would die!"

I had no way of knowing how brutal this implacable storm would become or how much destruction she would attempt.

My throat was sticky and dry, and I couldn't blink. It was as if my eyes were held open by pins.

Ryuto was leaning on my shoulders, and he groaned, his lips trembling. His voice was almost a gasp. "Back off, Hotaru… just back off…"

Right—don't go any further, Amemiya. It's not safe to unleash any more of your hatred on him.

Warning lights were flashing inside my head. My throat constricted and I had trouble breathing.

Don't say anything more to hurt him! You're backing him into a corner telling him that! He made time flow back on itself in order to reclaim the past he had lost, and it was still denied to him. This time he might just destroy everything. *What you're doing is incredibly dangerous, Amemiya!*

You really do intend to die here with him!

Kurosaki moved.

His arm reached into his jacket, and I saw him pull out something black and shiny. My body went instantly cold.

Ryuto tried to run toward Amemiya, but Maki grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

Why Maki?!

The gun was pointed straight at Amemiya. She did not waver. Instead, she unleashed her last, decisive blow on Kurosaki.

“Who could ever love a man like you? My mother knew that she would be miserable if she married you, so she cast you off and married my father! And I’m just like my mother!”

No! That isn’t true!

The words rang out in my mind, but who were they directed at?

Maki still held Ryuto back, but I slipped past them both and ran toward Amemiya, ignoring the shock on their faces.

Even I didn’t know how I managed to do something so bold.

I was nothing more than a bystander in this story, and I didn’t believe in rocking the boat so why had I decided to get involved now?

Was it because I couldn’t stand to watch someone die in front of me? Or because of the pull Kayano had over me since she reminded me so much of Miu? Or was it because I could still remember the sad look on Amemiya’s face when we’d spoken in the library, or because I felt like I, too, was guilty of Kurosaki’s crime in trying to go back to the past, even if it meant selling his soul to the devil?

I couldn’t begin to explain the turbulent impulse that threw me into motion.

But all of those things had something to do with it, I knew. My body moved faster than my mind. Fear, hesitation, cowardice, calculation, and everything else was expunged from my mind in an instant.

Needing to communicate in that impetuous way, I threw myself at Kurosaki and grabbed his arm.

“Inoue—!” Amemiya shouted in surprise.

I got my first full look at Kurosaki’s face.

He was a tall, thin man with the same features as the boy in Amemiya's sketchbook. I had pictured something dynamic and ominous like a demon, so when I saw the listless, corpselike vacancy in his face, I was shocked.

His hair was a light brown, and his eyes were like glass beads with a blue cast. He had handsome features that women would have found attractive, but his cheeks were sunken and he was horribly emaciated. He looked like a withered man well over a hundred years old. He seemed to be exhausted with life, as if he was trying to put an end to this story as soon as he could.

This… is Kurosaki?

He wasn't like I'd expected. He looked very delicate… and very sad…

Could this truly be the demon who had locked Amemiya away in a world of darkness?

What he'd done to Amemiya could never be forgiven, but the eyes that gazed down at me, full of suffering and despair, inspired a piercing sadness rather than rage.

Yes—I had wished for this, too! I had wanted to go back to the past whatever the cost!

"Amemiya! What you're saying is wrong. Kayano never said that about him. This won't help anyone. Not you or him. You'll only suffer," I hissed, panting.

Then a clear voice like an organ note rang out in the tensely quiet chapel.

"You're right; Hotaru was lying. There was a different reason that Kayano absolutely had to marry Takashi."

Tohko approached us, her long, thin braids swaying, leaving Maki and Ryuto standing in shock.

Kurosaki turned around and his eyes widened. Amemiya saw the sketchbook Tohko clutched to her chest, and she paled.

"I have no connection to your story. I'm just someone who reads all the tales the world has to offer, but there's something I've noticed since I *do* read so much. The story's main characters are always driven apart by unfortunate misunderstandings and missed chances, and they go farther down the path to

catastrophe. A story that should have had a happy ending can be transformed into a tragedy by the slightest mistake or hint of duplicity.

"It was like that for Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights.*

"Living in a remote village in nineteenth-century England, the daughter of a lonely, misanthropic clergyman produced one book for the world during her entire life with hardly any resources or experience and only the amazing power of her imagination. Have you ever read her story of love and hatred, of revenge, and an almost miraculous hunger, Hotaru?

"When it came out, the critics as a whole said that it was immoral, savage, vulgar, badly written, had an incomprehensible failure of a plot, and so on. They said that it should have been called *Withering Heights* instead. They tore it apart. Readers also furrowed their brows at the violent passions of the protagonists, and the book didn't sell at all."

The book girl held herself tall and noble as she continued her diatribe, as if challenging them all. Her clear black eyes flashed with intelligence.

"The more I read the book, the hungrier I get. My heart grumbles for sustenance and my throat feels like it's closing relentlessly in on itself and my brain burns with this crazed hunger, and it gets hard to breathe. But still for some reason, I always read it to the end.

"The characters in the book are all unflinchingly assertive and selfish, scorning and wounding each other by laying bare their emotions like animals, whether it's hatred, sadness, or love. I don't think I could ever be friends with any of them.

"Catherine often throws tantrums and goes on hunger strikes; Heathcliff is a spiteful stalker; and even Nelly is a busybody who talks too much; and the second-generation Catherine's stuck-up behavior toward Hareton is just too much, even if she does soften at the end! You want to shove your face into the book and shout at them to have a little sympathy for other people, to take a breath and calm down, to go out into the world and broaden their horizons.

"But still, at some point that tumultuous story and the deeply flawed people living in its shut-off world—the forthright souls free of deception—become so dear that they tear at your heart.

“It makes you think that it would be great if you could rip open your heart like that and have a love that would go to the farthest extremes to pursue and lay claim to one another, and it makes you believe that if you had someone who loved you that much, you wouldn’t need anyone else, or that if you could meet someone like that, there could be no greater happiness.

“That’s the kind of story this is.

“Even as you feel terror and anxiety crushing your chest, wrapped up in a world of bellowing storms, you can’t stop reading. You may be afraid, you may despise it, you may refuse to accept it, but you can’t help but be intrigued. Even the flaws become charming. That’s the kind of power this story has.

“Technique alone could never produce something like that. It had to be written with Emily’s soul. That’s the reason it’s still being read more than a hundred years later.”

Kurosaki lowered the gun and looked at Tohko as if she was some unearthly creature.

What was this girl? Why was he listening to her mutely?

The dazed look on his face demanded as much.

In contrast, Amemiya was hunched over in anguish, trembling.

Tohko’s eyebrows knit together sadly as she said, “… Kurosaki and Kayano are very similar to Heathcliff and Catherine in *Wuthering Heights.* They grew up together, never apart for even a moment, feeling as if the other one’s soul was their own. But when she became old enough, Catherine married Edgar, the son of a good family. She tells Nelly that if she were to marry Heathcliff, it would reduce her to poverty, and Heathcliff overhears this and leaves the estate.

“But Heathcliff was the only one Catherine ever truly loved, not Edgar. And Heathcliff never cared for any woman but Catherine.”

Kurosaki’s eyes wavered at the impact of that, and Amemiya closed hers firmly, awaiting the words she feared hearing.

“Catherine tells Nelly that if she marries, she’ll be able to rescue Heathcliff from her brother Hindley and help him to make something of himself. She says

that was the most important reason for marrying Edgar. Of course, not everyone understands that reasoning. It's only natural that it would be criticized as immoral. But that was Catherine's pure, unsullied motive, which came from her love for Heathcliff.

"Catherine declares that her soul is made of the same stuff as Heathcliff's, which is as different from Edgar's soul as moonlight and lightning or frost and fire. As time goes by, her love for Edgar changes, but her love for Heathcliff is an eternally solid bedrock, which doesn't look enjoyable on the surface, but which she couldn't possibly live without. 'I am Heathcliff,' she says."

After remaining silent through all this, Kurosaki exposed his passion for the first time to interject.

"What are you trying to say? Are you implying that Kayano's feelings were the same as Catherine's? That she became Amemiya's wife in order to help me out of my pitiable lot? Ridiculous. Your fantasies mean nothing. Kayano told me that she was getting married with a smile on her face. That if she married me, she couldn't have a house with a pool or a Yorkshire terrier."

Tohko's eyes shone with tears, and she looked even more dejected.

"You're right. You can't believe me no matter how much I argue, so I'll give you proof of Kayano's love for you.

"You and Kayano exchanged letters that you wrote in a number code, right? Before she left school, Kayano left messages for you on the desks and walls in classrooms. They've all been wiped off now, but at the time the school newspaper wrote about a ghost leaving mysterious numbers everywhere, and I was able to find part of her message."

Tohko took out her student handbook and opened it.

I remembered the pile of student essays on the desk in the club room, and I gasped. In her own way, Tohko had been moving the investigation steadily forward.

Tohko slowly read out the numbers she had written into her handbook.

"15-5-11-28-17-8-21-28-3-21-28-25-28-17-3-28-15-5-11—25-28-13-25-2-2-28-2-5-12-21-28-17-5-25-28-22-5-8-21-12-21-8"

Their code which began from the *K* in Kayano.

The messages that the girl he loved had roamed the school by night to leave him were now struggling into light.

“ ‘You are me, I am you—I will love Aoi forever.’ ”

Kurosaki’s eyes looked as if they were about to pop out, and his hand shook as he clung to his gun. It made him look like a very vulnerable young man.

“No! If she loved me, why did she betray me?! To give me a future? You think I agree with a motive like that?”

No words could reach him; his heart was hardened by hatred. But Tohko gazed straight back at him, refusing to back down.

“Then the surest proof of Kayano’s love. Kayano had to marry Takashi in order to protect your future and the product of her love for you. She was—”

Just then, Amemiya ripped aside her veil and screamed, “Stop! Don’t tell him!”

Amemiya’s lips were blue like someone who had been in the ocean for a long time. She was breathing wildly, her thin shoulders heaving, and she gazed at Tohko beseechingly.

“Please!… Stop. You can’t tell him that. Please, please don’t.”

“But, Amemiya, Kurosaki is your—”

“Don’t say it!!”

Tohko shut her mouth, conflicted, but Ryuto’s voice rang out behind her.

“She’s… Hotaru is your daughter, Kurosaki!”

Amemiya whirled around to look at Ryuto.

“Don’t be insane!” Kurosaki growled, but Ryuto fixed him with a glare. His eyes sparked deep within. Holding his stomach, he leaned forward and started shuffling toward us.

“Nngh… Hotaru told me! You gave her food and told her you were never comin’ back, and then you left. Hotaru was so hysterical that she smashed everythin’ in that room with your golf clubs. Nngh—that’s how much of a shock it was when you left her. Hotaru clung to me and babbled about a lot of stuff.”

“Stop it, Ryu!”

Amemiya pleaded with him.

Occasionally resting against a pew, panting raggedly, he made his way slowly up the aisle. As he went, he questioned Amemiya with merciless intensity.

“Isn’t that right, Hotaru? You told me that, didn’t you? You said he was your real dad. That your parents got married so your mom could have you.”

“Stop it!”

“You said Kurosaki was the one she loved, that she felt sorry for your dad.”

“Stop it, Ryu! Just stop!”

Amemiya started to cry. Ryuto shouted, “You told me that, Hotaru! You said Kurosaki was your real dad! You… you told me that!”

Finally Amemiya covered her ears with both hands and shook her head; then she fell to her knees.

“Nooooo!”

Kurosaki was wide-eyed and dazed. Tohko spoke to him sadly.

“What Ryuto said is the truth. There are words in the notes Kayano left at school that point to that.—‘I will protect Aoi’s child.’ ”

Kurosaki let out a bestial groan from deep in his throat. He was violently torn between his inability and his unwillingness to believe it. Maki was the one who delivered the final judgment.

Maki had been standing alone by the wall, watching everything with a tranquil look. She began speaking now in a detached tone.

“At the time, Kayano was under the control of her guardian, Hironobu Goto. If he learned that she had a child by the nameless boy Kujo had brought back with him from abroad, he certainly would have forced her to have an abortion. Kayano knew that, so she had to quickly find a husband with the privilege and power to protect her child. That man was Takashi Amemiya.

“Kayano’s plan was extremely selfish and ill-planned. I’m not trying to defend her in any way. It turned out to be a catastrophe for Amemiya, who raised

another man's child, thinking it was his own. For that, he was detested by the real father, his company was taken over, and his heart condition worsened and he died. You can't call that anything but a terrible waste."

The unperturbed, coldly objective look in Maki's eyes lent the quantity of her barbed words a piercing persuasiveness.

Kurosaki's eyes were wide in his ashen face. I could sense the shock that he was feeling, and cold sweat ran down my back.

The girl he had persecuted for being the daughter of a man he hated was his own daughter. He must have felt beyond any hope. He had sold his soul to the devil to reclaim the past, and all he had gained was the sin of defiling his own daughter.

Amemiya was kneeling on the floor, her dress spread out around her, hugging herself and weeping.

Tohko spoke to her gently.

"You knew he was your real father, didn't you, Hotaru? Your housekeeper was the one who gave you that message from your mother. She had written it inside the George MacDonald book *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* that she read to you when you were little.

"I saw the complete collection of MacDonald on the bookshelf in the basement room. *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* was the only one that was missing, and *The Light Princess and Other Stories* was in its place, a paperback published by a different company. Since his complete children's collection is out of print, it couldn't be replaced with the same book.

"Why was *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* the only one missing? Konoha told me that you were reading it in the library at school and that there were numbers written on the inside of the cover. He also told me that your housekeeper said she gave you a gift from your mother for your birthday."

Amemiya's shoulders trembled with her sobs.

"My mother… was a horrible person. She was betraying my father all along. He was so wonderful, but I wasn't his daughter. I was *his.* She wrote how she felt about him all over the book. I love you… I love you… Even if my body is

destroyed, my soul will be with you forever… You are me and I am you… You were more important to me even than myself… So I wanted to give you a bright future, even if I had to exchange the happiness I could have had with you… You're so smart, and if you pay a little attention to your appearance, you're too wonderful to lose out to anyone, and you're brave and resilient…"

Amemiya's voice trembled as she wept. She was utterly forsaken.

"*Hkk*… Why did she leave that book to me? She even put in a piece of paper with the hint to start from the *K* in Kayano. Why would she try to tell me something like that?

"I'm sure she never imagined that I would become her replacement and that I had already learned the number code. I could read it just fine without the hint. I had to read the love letters my mother had written to a man who wasn't my father, even though he loved her with all his heart. He would stroke my hair and tell me I had started to look like my mother. He sounded so pleased when he said it… He would smile and tell me how happy he was that he had been able to marry my mother… And she betrayed him. Nngh… She was awful. I feel sorry for my father."

I wish I could go to some other world… like the girl in this book… I wish I could go to the world of light…

That's a secret. I can't tell it to anyone.

Amemiya had whispered morosely, hugging the old book to her chest.

Kayano had stared back at me in the chemistry lab, her eyes infinitely frail.

It was too cruel that one girl was forced to bear the weight of a truth that had lain dormant for seventeen years.

Amemiya had borne it alone, deep in the darkness, hugging the secret to her heart.

What would happen to them now? How could Amemiya or Kurosaki be saved?

All we could do was hold our breath and watch her as she sobbed.

The gun slipped from Kurosaki's hand and hit the floor with a dull thud. He knelt down as if in penance and muttered haltingly, holding his head in his

hands.

“My daughter… If I’d known… If I’d met her as my daughter…”

Perhaps he wasn’t a demon. He was only a weak human being like the rest of us.

Amemiya stood up and shook her head wildly, the tears soaking her face.

“Stop it! You can’t be sorry! It’s too late for that! I can’t get back the time you destroyed! I won’t let you beg forgiveness and be the only one who gets to live with a clear conscience! I’ll hate you for the rest of my life!”

Her bloodshot eyes glinted, and her voice nearly cracked as she screamed.

“I’ll hate you! I will never, *never* forgive you! I hate you more than anyone! You make me sick!”

His head drooping, Kurosaki looked very small and pitiful, full of suffering, and he picked up the gun that had fallen to the floor. He seemed capable of killing himself at any moment. That was how grave his crimes had been.

But…

With a taut ache I remembered what Ryuto had said a moment ago.

Amemiya had known that Kurosaki was her real father, but Kurosaki hadn’t known that until this very moment.

So why had he left the house and told her he would never come back? Had he released her?

Hadn’t that house originally been Kurosaki’s home? His employee Saeko had said that Kurosaki was staying at a condo more often recently. The many times that Ryuto went over, he’d said there was never anyone home.

Only Amemiya had been there. Kurosaki had left her much earlier, then.

But if Kurosaki had left her, there was no reason for her to get married in order to be free of him.

So then why had she summoned him to a church and hurled those attacks at him? For revenge? Because she simply wanted to hurt him?

No, it had to be more than that.

I was nothing more than someone who read stories, but as Tohko said, because I *do* read so much, I noticed something. Kayano and Amemiya had both given me plenty of hints with the way they spoke and looked!

This story wasn't over yet.

There was still something that hadn't come to light.

Had Amemiya felt only hatred for Kurosaki when she was in the dark basement room? Had she felt nothing else at all?

And why had Amemiya been at the hospital?

Amemiya's true goal was—

Ah, but that would be—

My earlobes burned just as hot as the back of my brain as I turned to Amemiya with a question.

"Amemiya, why did you stab Ryuto? I heard that you started dating lots of guys at the beginning of this year. Did something happen to you two around then?"

Amemiya jumped and looked at me. Her voice was husky and her throat trembled, but I went on, though I wished I could cry.

"Why were you so afraid of revealing that you're Kurosaki's daughter? You didn't tell him about the message from your mother. Did you keep the book she wrote her feelings in hidden all that time? Out of guilt toward your father? But then why do you need to feel guilty for what happened to your father?"

Amemiya shook her head. She shook it again and again, as if refuting a voice inside her head. Fat teardrops fell from her bloodshot eyes.

Amemiya looked like she was suffering very much, and her color was getting worse and worse while sweat rolled down her forehead. She didn't look good.

Kurosaki was almost as pale, and he clutched at his stomach with one clawlike hand, gritting his teeth.

I hoped I was wrong. Otherwise, I would feel awful for Amemiya.

I willed this thought so hard that my temples throbbed; it felt as if my head

were going to split. Beside me, Tohko opened the sketchbook she carried and showed it to Amemiya. It was the picture of the boy with blue eyes.

“You drew this picture, didn’t you, Hotaru? Is this boy Aoi?”

Amemiya shook her head, weeping.

“… isn’t.”

Her breathing became even more ragged. Tohko’s eyes grew even more damp as she murmured, “I’m sure your mother told you stories about the boy who was her best friend growing up. She would show you pictures, too.”

“No… it’s not him.”

Amemiya’s translucent white skin grew even glassier, and her breathing became uneven.

“This picture is drawn very attentively with very gentle lines. You didn’t hate this Aoi at least.”

Tohko’s voice was just as thick with tears as her eyes, which shone with a deep melancholy.

But Tohko…

“Tell us how you really felt, Hotaru. You two can start over again from here.”

But Tohko…, I thought, my heart breaking inside. *That’s not the right question to ask at all.*

Amemiya’s voice shook so badly it was hard to catch what she said.

“No, no. There’s no more time. There’s no more time!”

She staggered onto her slender legs, and her thin body wheeled forward like a flower whose stem had broken.

“Hotaru!”

Ryuto and Tohko both cried out. Kurosaki stood and ran over to her.

His eyes bulged, bloodshot, and his mouth opened; he looked as if his own heart were tearing in half.

Amemiya lolled forward, kneeling on the floor, and Kurosaki propped her up in

his arms. Amemiya instantly flung his hands away and screamed.

“Don’t touch me!”

Kurosaki’s face stiffened.

Beads of sweat rolled down Amemiya’s face, and her shoulders shook as she struggled for breath. It was clear now to anyone who saw her that something unusual was going on in Amemiya’s body.

Bitter regrets swelled in my chest. Why hadn’t I noticed it earlier? When Kayano had embraced me in the chemistry lab, I’d caught an unsettlingly clean fragrance. It was the smell of medicine—the smell of a hospital.

Why, *why* hadn’t I noticed?

Kurosaki wasn’t the one who was ill.

Kayano had whispered, *We are finally leaving the world of the living behind.* I had glimpsed Amemiya out the hospital window. The clues had always been dangling right in front of me.

For Amemiya, there was no more time.

Maki may have been the only one who had known about it. She watched Amemiya and Kurosaki grimly. It was a dispassionate look, almost as if it was her duty to watch until the very last moment and never turn away.

It made me shudder to see Maki like that.

What kind of resolution were you hoping for?

Through heaving breaths, Amemiya whispered ruefully, “I was… getting shots, but… Mr. Takamizawa would take me to the hospital… every single day… to get my shots, but… soon the medicine will stop working. I’m going to die soon, just like my mother.”

She rolled her eyes up and stared at Kurosaki. He was pale.

“You knew… didn’t you? That’s why you tried to strangle me that night six months ago. I didn’t know yet that I was going to die. But you—you were so angry with me, so despondent that I could tell, and I knew you were really trying to kill me.”

Amemiya's face twisted.

"While you squeezed my throat, I thought, *I wouldn't mind dying this way.* I thought because I didn't act like my mother very well, you could tell that we were different people and that you hated me for that and didn't need me. If so, then I wouldn't have minded dying right then. But—"

Her frown deepened and a powerful grief appeared in her eyes, but it quickly transformed into a fiery hatred.

"While you were strangling me, I heard you say, 'Good-bye, Kayano, my betrayer.' "

Kurosaki looked as if he had been stabbed through the heart.

"You just couldn't forgive *Kayano* for dying—for getting herself sick and dying before you did. You were distraught with *Kayano* for leaving you behind again, and you were only brooding over whether or not to kill her yourself.

"You never saw anything but my mother! *Hotaru* didn't exist!

"So I cried because I didn't want to die as Kayano. But then your hands loosened. I told you, 'I'm not my mother,' and you looked taken aback and let go of my neck. Then you left the house, and you *never* came back again! You didn't see any value in killing me since I wasn't *her*! You cast me aside and ran away!"

The storm—it had raged on.

A fierce gale that snapped trees and sheared stone.

"When you left, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't eat. You did this to me!

"One month ago, I overheard Takamizawa talking to my doctor at the hospital. When I realized that I was going to die, I finally understood why you had tried to kill me. I went to your office to know for sure, but you refused to see me. I laughed as I rode the swing in the middle of the night. Laughed at what a coward you were.

"I look too much like my mother, and you were afraid to watch me die so you fled. But as soon as I started dating someone, you tried to pull them away from me. But still you didn't come back to the house. If I approached, you fled. I laughed as the rain pelted me at what a coward you were, what a weakling you

were, what a pathetic man! I decided right then to get revenge on you. Before I died, I would take everything from you; I would drive a nail into your heart that would ache for the rest of your life!”

The words she threw at him through her tears sounded like a confession of love.

As she screamed out her revenge, Amemiya’s eyes told of exactly the opposite emotion as they looked up at Kurosaki.

Why hadn’t she told him about Kayano’s message?

Why had she denied so adamantly that she was his daughter?

Ryuto had explained it: The strongest human emotion is hatred, that hatred would last much longer than love, that hatred could continue because of love, and that love could continue because of hatred.

On a stormy night, Amemiya had glared into the darkness as she rode alone on the swings.

Ryuto had fallen in love with her then.

Leaning on a pew, Ryuto watched Amemiya in agony as she told of her hatred for another man, throwing her life away to tell it.

And Tohko—

You two can start over again from here.

Tohko must have realized now that those words were nothing but an impossible wish.

Tohko’s imagination had exposed the storm hidden inside Amemiya.

She had brought the truth of Amemiya and Kurosaki and Kayano to light and had proved that there was no reason for any of them to deprive themselves, that if they walked the right path from then on, it was entirely possible for them to fill their empty bellies.

In order to correct past mistakes, you had to turn back time—that was a simplistic, easy answer.

But time *can’t go backward!*

It wasn’t easy at all!

In my third year of middle school, no matter how I wished for it, it never happened.

Human beings aren’t capable of going back to the way things used to be: Time won’t simply run back like a tape to the point where things went wrong.

And even Tohko, who ate stories and talked of her limitless imagination, was not all-powerful.

She was nothing more than a high school student like the rest of us, an ordinary book girl, a reader of stories.

Truly impossible things—truly insatiable hungers—do exist in our world.

Tohko’s black eyes glittered sadly as she stood and watched ineffectually.

Continuing to spew the love she called hatred, Amemiya reached out to Kurosaki with her thin arms like dried twigs. Her rumpled face contained a hopeless grief.

“There are feelings inside me that hold you dear—they’re my mother’s curse. My mother… lives on inside me. These aren’t my emotions.”

Though she denied it, her white hands, her desperate gaze, all moved toward him.

Amemiya seemed to fall onto Kurosaki, clinging to his body and burying her face in his chest as she wept.

“But… without you, I don’t exist. Wherever I go, my spirit returns to that gray room in the basement.”

Rejecting food, rejecting reality, Amemiya had prayed for a life imprisoned underground.

That was the only truth about Amemiya.

She had provoked Kurosaki and tried to lure him back to their dollhouse in order to accomplish that.

Kurosaki wasn’t the only one who had tried to reverse the flow of time.

Amemiya had done the same thing.

Was it love or hatred? It was obvious that Amemiya herself no longer knew. Even so, she wanted to spend the last of the time remaining to her with Kurosaki. She wanted him to see her for herself, not her mother.

All the nights that she had roamed about as Kayano, Amemiya had been searching for Kurosaki.

Nestled together, Amemiya and Kurosaki resembled each other and there was no awkwardness, as if they had always been meant to be together.

Of course—they were father and daughter.

But that would not save them and especially not Amemiya.

Though he held Amemiya up, Kurosaki seemed hesitant to embrace her. His face twisted with pain, and in a muffled voice he murmured, “I… don’t want to let anyone have you. You’re right; I left because I was afraid to watch you die, but… I couldn’t forget about you. Wherever I went, whatever I did, I… would think about you. When I tried to eat, it made me sick… I couldn’t eat anything.”

He started to touch Amemiya’s hair with his emaciated fingers but hesitated and stopped his hand just before he touched her. He balled his hand into a fist.

“Every time I saw you walking with some boy, I felt sick… and my mind burned… I was overcome by the impulse to kill him. When I read your letter about getting married… I felt like I saw the world… falling apart around me.”

Words of torment and remorse slipped through his parched lips.

“… If only… I had known you… as a daughter.”

Tohko’s face fell further. She looked ready to burst into tears at any moment.

Ryuto, too, was gripping the edge of the pew, biting down on his lip.

I felt as if my heart had been wrenched from my body.

That was because what Kurosaki said was the single cruelest thing Amemiya could hear.

She couldn’t help but realize that the person he loved best, for ever and all time, was Kayano.

His words may have been the truth, devoid of any fabrication, but they could hardly be what Amemiya had craved with everything that she was.

Amemiya raised her bandaged hands and pounded against Kurosaki’s chest.

With the last of her remaining strength, her head still buried in his chest, she silently beat against him—again and again, as if it were too, too hateful, too, too bitter to bear.

Accepting her blows with gritted teeth, Kurosaki groaned.

In the end, her breathing labored, Amemiya circled her arms around Kurosaki.

Surprise showed in his face.

“I… I hated you… I never loved you. But I dreamed that I became a character in some other story and met you as your daughter. I wished that I could have had a normal, happy family with you and with my mother. Then no one would have been unhappy. My father and Aunt Reiko and me… and you… None of us would have suffered.”

Amemiya raised her face, and I was taken aback.

Her face smeared with tears, Amemiya looked up at Kurosaki in anguish. She seemed ready to collapse from a pain that tortured her body and spirit, but once her eyes met his, his sepia-colored eyes welled with heartrending emotion and slowly he smiled.

Tears spilled from the corners of his eyes.

Though the person she loved most of all had rejected her feelings, though she knew it was a passion that would never be united, at the very end her face was clear and unsullied.

Kurosaki's eyes widened in surprise.

As she gazed back at him whom she had loved as much as she had hated, her eyes crinkled serenely. Amemiya whispered in a soft, ephemeral voice, "Father…"

Then a shock that was almost crazed in its intensity came over Kurosaki's face.

I would never forget Amemiya's clear, silent eyes as she watched or the tears that coursed down her cheeks.

Amemiya rested her cheek against Kurosaki's chest and closed her eyes.

Then, without ever reopening them, she drew her last breath in her hospital bed a week later.

Epilogue – And So We…

The story was too similar to their own, and she was unable to finish it. She smiled faintly and returned the book.

“I don’t think Catherine had to marry Edgar. She should have been with Heathcliff, even if they were poor. Then no one would have been unhappy.”

She rarely expressed herself. She was a kind girl who smiled elusively and kept a dreamlike secret locked in her heart.

“If I were Catherine, I would stay by Heathcliff’s side to the very end. I would never abandon him. But Heathcliff still loved Catherine, even though she betrayed him. So much so that even after she died, he violated her grave and begged her to come back as a ghost. He didn’t care how any other woman felt about him; Catherine was the only person Heathcliff could love eternally.”

She was already afflicted by her illness at this time, and her doctor had predicted that she would not live much longer. When had she become aware of that?

When I found out that she would soon be departing the world of the living, I decided to write down her story. That was my first test. Actually, I am very bad at composition. I feel unparalleled joy whenever I draw pictures, but writing is torture.

Nevertheless, I started writing down their story.

I do not know whether I wanted to leave behind some evidence of her life or whether I needed to work through everything I had seen in my own heart by writing about the miracle they had achieved.

When I am drawing, I feel very free, as if I can pierce the veil laid over

anything and control it all; but writing makes me anxious, and I was unable to anticipate where this story would end up.

I first met her in middle school.

I was in second year and she was in first, and we both belonged to the school's art club.

Back then, my father and grandfather were not yet concerned by my art and had said nothing about me drawing. I am positive they thought it was a fine hobby for me to have.

My grandfather brags that we can trace our family back to the tenth century. My grandfather directs the school, but he also has several other companies and his network spans every field. I am very often shocked to discover just how far his reach extends.

When I was little, my grandfather decided everything for me—my pastimes, what I studied, what I wore, who I was friends with—I could only accept whatever my grandfather had arranged for me. He would not allow me to refuse it.

The world in which I found myself was gorgeous and highly formalized, but it was terribly stifling. My mother must have hated it because she and my father divorced during my second year of elementary school, and she left our house.

My mother was a foreigner from Ireland. My mother was uninhibited and strong willed, and she voiced her displeasure, so it amazes me that she married into such a suffocatingly stodgy family and that she was able to stand it for seven years. Of course, my grandfather hated her impudence and the fact that she came from a foreign family of commoners. After the divorce, I was forbidden to ever see her.

As I grew up, I began to resemble my mother more and more in personality and appearance, which must have frustrated my grandfather. In my third year of middle school, when we were asked to write an essay titled "Dreams for My Future" for homework, I wrote that I wanted to paint while traveling the world. My grandfather was enraged when he read that, and he lectured that he would never allow me to be a painter because my role was to someday get married and continue the family line. My grandfather had the image of my

mother, who had left the family, in his mind, and he was probably concerned that I might leave, too.

When I finished middle school and started at the school my grandfather directs, this time I was not allowed to join the art club. He made some incomprehensible argument that our family had for generations belonged to the prestigious orchestra and served as its conductors, so I had to do it, too.

I knew opposing my grandfather was futile, so I offered him a condition.

In exchange for joining the orchestra, I would receive a workroom that I could use as I saw fit, that I would be allowed to paint whenever I wanted there, and that I would not paint anywhere except there.

My grandfather reluctantly accepted my condition, and I acquired my own private workroom.

He was angry that it was inside the music building, but… so what?

If I got good grades and waved the conductor's baton around for the orchestra, he did not pester me about everything nearly as much as he had in middle school. He must have thought that if I was pushed too hard, I might leave home and then where would he be? As long as I was in my grandfather's grasp, I was allowed all sorts of special privileges and I knew how to use them. My grandfather seemed pleased that I was good at using people. But though I could inspire others, I could not inspire myself.

I should go back to her story.

She had a modest and bashful personality, so while we were in the art club together in middle school, she almost never spoke to me since I was an upperclassman. Most of the time she drew quietly by herself in a corner of the room while people I did not even know thronged around me.

By some chance, that day I was not mobbed—she and I were alone in the room. She did not hear me come in and continued painting with watercolors in her sketchbook, which was balanced on her knees. She looked very pretty and content. A small smile rested in the corners of her mouth. I was transfixed.

Filled with curiosity, I peeked surreptitiously over her shoulder and saw that she had drawn the picture of a boy about her own age.

His hair was painted a pale brown, and his eyes had a faint blue cast. It was a beautiful, unambiguous image. Despite that, the boy's expression was gloomy and a lonely pall hung over him.

"Is that your boyfriend?" I asked, and she whirled around in surprise, flushing to the tips of her ears.

"No… um… I've never met him."

Her mother had shown her pictures of the boy, she stammered. She was so flustered it made me smile, so I pursued the subject even further. She hugged her sketchbook tightly to her and shyly said, "I feel like I'm going to meet him someday… That would be nice."

Her expression made it immediately obvious that she had fallen in love with a boy she knew only through photographs. This starry-eyed little girl struck me as so pure and adorable that I found myself liking her very much. But at the same time I envied her, my heart throbbing painfully.

Probably because I was unlikely to be allowed freedom in my romances.

Also, I had by that time realized that there was something inside me that was cold and cruel, and so it was impossible to imagine myself being in love as intently as she was. And so I envied her for experiencing those feelings naturally.

"Um… Please don't tell anyone."

She looked up at me anxiously, and I promised to keep it a secret.

I never talked to her again after that.

Her father and aunt died suddenly, and she stopped coming to the art club, severing our connection.

I wondered about her in the back of my mind, but I never went to see her and never asked her friends or class monitor about her. We had not been on such close terms.

Six months later, I spotted her at a party. I was a third-year in middle school, and she was in second year.

She was with a man who had light brown hair and lightly tinted sunglasses. I

asked around and was told that he was her guardian, a shady guy with no end of dark rumors about him.

I felt as if I had seen him somewhere before and stared at him surreptitiously. When he took off his sunglasses in order to wipe the sweat from his forehead, I saw his brown eyes with their blue cast and I knew that he was the boy in the sketchbook all grown up.

So she had met the boy she had dreamed of.

She was standing, her arm in his grasp. She was terribly thin, her vacant eyes as blank as a doll's. It was only when he spoke to her that she jumped slightly, which made it seem like she was scared of him. Despite that, her thin fingers clung tightly to his arm, as if she might die if she knocked his hand away. He never left her side for a moment.

I didn't know what their relationship actually was, but I supposed she must have been happy.

She had received what she wished for most, no matter what form it took.

Huddled together, the two of them resembled a pair of unicorns, frail and fantastic, and with her absent gaze, she looked like someone dreaming.

A few days later, I saw her in the hallway at school.

I called her over and asked, "So you met your prince, hmm?"

After a brief silence, she took a quick breath and answered, "Yes."

There was determination and power in her voice.

It was beautiful.

My heart fluttered, and I felt my knees wobble.

She must have been facing his cruel treatment at that point, but she seemed admirably optimistic that the day would come when things would be kinder between them. She did not yet know that he was her father, so she must have been hoping that someday he would see her and not her mother.

I never stopped watching them after that.

I was never a confidante of hers, but I had one of my grandfather's

underlings investigate the man, and I learned that he had been an orphan living in her mother's house and how he had reached his present position and taken possession of her and how he ruled over her. I thought it was very reminiscent of a book I had just read.

That book was *Wuthering Heights.*

Six months ago, at the beginning of this year, I stopped being simply a reader and became a participant in the story. I could not bear to see her grown so thin and anemic, so I urged her to be examined by a doctor. I never imagined that the results would be what they were, that she would have only a little more time before her life ended…

Apparently the hospital contacted the man since he was her family.

In utter despair, he tried to kill her, but he left the house without finishing the act.

Left on her own, she was overcome by a powerful sense of loss and she could no longer eat anything. She called herself Kayano and put on her mother's old uniform and began to wander about at night.

Around this time, I began visiting her house frequently and started to learn her story.

It was also at this time that I began writing down their story.

In doing so, I became the tale's author and was gripped by an odd mania that even I could not explain, compelling me to craft their story.

I wouldn't let their story end that way.

I would give it a conclusion!

But apparently I have no talent as a writer. First my heroine started running wild. Then the man who was supposed to be the hero would not do what I wanted him to. Then unexpected characters kept popping up one after another and breaking into the story, and I got fed up.

Tohko Amano, who calls herself a "book girl," was the object of many years of my unrequited love. From the first moment I saw her, I was fascinated by her immaculate, mellow, uncanny air, and I pestered her to model nude for

me, but even now my desire has not been realized.

I never thought Tohko would get involved in the story and certainly never thought the boy Ryuto Sakurai, whose family she boarded with, would start dating Hotaru.

I created a stir about a ghost to scare Tohko off and then gave her information that would not cause any trouble and tried to draw her away from Hotaru.

Tohko is scared of ghosts. She thought it was a secret, but it was obvious in the way she acted. At summer school in our first year, I had tested her courage. Though she said that shrieking about things like ghosts was childish, she gripped the salt shaker on our table much too tightly and never let go of it until I was done.

As things went on, I found Tohko's fright simply adorable. Provoking her gave me pleasure, and I wound up going too far. But I achieved my goal in any case.

In the meantime, the troublemaker Ryuto Sakurai started hanging around Tohko's little friend, and they began to investigate Hotaru from every angle.

The reason she had originally begun cycling through boys was that it let her be with him; she could feel his gaze, his footsteps, his presence. The boys were always worthless, and they would hit her and call her names, but she appeared to feel sorry for *them.*

He followed her everywhere and eliminated the boys one after another, but like her, he was cornered and he descended into anorexia.

They could not live without each other even so, but he returned to the house only once, and after he had given her food, he told her that he would never be back.

She had gone wild, deranged, had stabbed Ryuto Sakurai when he arrived in the middle of it, and in the end she even locked Tohko and Konoha in the basement room and tried to incinerate them.

I gave up.

It was impossible for an amateur writer like me to control this convoluted

and wandering story or to get it back on track.

Holding my head in my hands, I may have wished for the storm to come.

For a new storm full of flashing willpower to blow the roiling tempest in the story even farther away.

So when Tohko discerned that the structure of this story was that of *Wuthering Heights,* I was relieved. I may have guided Tohko to the site of their confrontation.

I prayed that perhaps this "book girl" would be able to lead the story back to its original course.

Just as I expected, Tohko set off the storm and swept away the grime that had coated their hearts. All that was left was the naked truth.

But at the same time, it became clear that the only person he truly loved was Kayano Kujo and that Hotaru would never be more than her mother's shadow. For him, only Kayano could be the other half of his soul, his eternity.

Even after hearing his cruel admission, still she had smiled in her last moments.

***Father…,* she had whispered, closing her eyes in his embrace.**

It was magnificent.

She was not Catherine Linton, who had been imprisoned in Wuthering Heights and whose destiny had been twisted by Heathcliff, the vengeful ogre. She was a different Catherine Earnshaw and he a different Heathcliff.

Because this was no daughter of the refined Edgar Linton made of frost and moonlight—she was the daughter of Heathcliff made of heat and lightning—I suppose it was only natural that the story diverged from *Wuthering Heights* partway through.

And the blue-eyed Heathcliff, a captive to his hatred, was not a true demon, either. He was just an ordinary man who had loved Kayano and who had been hurt and exhausted.

This is how their story resolved, but the story I had been writing was a mixture of my own imagination and fabrication and might have become

something else entirely.

As if perhaps a different *Wuthering Heights* had come into being other than the one that the nagging, good-natured, and meddlesome but still somehow frigid Ellen Dean had told.

If some other person told this story, perhaps it would become something utterly different.

After Emily Brontë, the author of *Wuthering Heights,* died, her sister Charlotte wrote an essay in the preface defending the book from its critics. Charlotte wanted to show the world the true value, the true fire, of the book that her beloved sister had poured her entire soul into writing.

But I never intended to protect them. I had not meant to be their spokesperson.

I would not contradict anyone, no matter how bizarre his actions and her feelings seemed; no matter if no one understood them, I would not contradict them.

I had wanted her to see her love freely, however she wanted to. Even if that was wrong, even if I could never be forgiven for it, even if it went against society's morals or ethics to do as her heart desired, free—

In that last moment, her soul had flashed like lightning.

I will probably never show anyone this story that I have spent six months writing. If only one person in the entire world knows about it—that is enough.

Amemiya's funeral was held quietly at a church just before summer vacation started.

Buried in white lilies, her eyes closed and smiling, Amemiya's face was peaceful in death, and she seemed happy.

Before the burial, Maki placed a diary with a fine russet cover into the casket. She told us it was her diary from when she was a child, but the cover still looked new.

As she straightened, pressed her rich lips together, and watched Amemiya's

final moments with dignity, I wondered what she was thinking. She had explained that she'd counseled Amemiya because she thought it would benefit her family to have Amemiya join it, but I wondered if there wasn't actually a completely different reason she'd done it.

The day we found out that Amemiya had breathed her last at the hospital, I was writing an improv story after school. The prompts Tohko had given me were the same as they had been once before: "apple orchard," "flower swing," and "fully automatic washing machine."

In the center of an apple orchard bathed in clear light and a pure, tangy fragrance, a boy and a girl tossed clothes into a fully automatic washing machine. *Hey, let's wash this, too! Oh, and this and this!* They giggled and danced around the washing machine. They played on a flower swing beside the rattling appliance. The boy pushed the girl, and she swung higher and higher into the clear blue sky; then she returned to him, again and again, never slowing.

Amemiya and Kurosaki—daughter and father—could never have been united romantically, but perhaps in the world of the imagination…

The western sun splashed into the dusty room in golden waves where Tohko sat on a metal fold-up chair, her slender finger pressed to her lips, reading my story with a subdued expression.

Then she tore off a corner and put it in her mouth.

She tore off more and slowly chewed it, then again, tears filling her eyes.

"It's like apples boiled with lemons and honey and wine, then chilled until it's a very cold applesauce… It's… very sweet. I love it," she whispered, setting the paper on the table.

Tohko didn't eat any more of the story. She rolled the paper into a tube and then tied a violet ribbon around it. "Let's give this to Hotaru."

Next, she ate the notes that Amemiya had left in the book club mailbox. The sun had dyed the room an angry red.

She held each note in her hands, gazed at each one of the numbers written on it with her clear, dark eyes, and though her throat trembled occasionally and her eyes watered with pain and sadness, Tohko continued to eat until she had

finished the very last one.

25-28-2-5-12-21-28-15-5-11 (I love you.)

2-5-5-1-28-17-10-28-3-21-28-4-5-10-28-3-5-10-24-21-8 (Look at me, not Mother.)

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-19-17-8-21-28-25-22-28-25-10-27-9-28-17-28-9-25-4 (I don't care if it's a sin.)

25-28-17-19-19-21-6-10-28-10-24-21-28-6-11-4-25-9-24-3-21-4-10 (I accept the punishment.)

19-5-3-21-28-18-17-19-1-28-17-5-25 (Come back, Aoi.)

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4 (I don't need heaven.)

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4 (I don't need heaven.)

25-28-20-5-4-27-10-28-4-21-21-20-28-24-21-17-12-21-4 (I don't need heaven.)

The strings of ordinary numbers written on the shredded notes had transformed into the story of one girl's emotions.

I wondered if Tohko could detect that spirit, that truth, when she ate the notes.

I stood beside Tohko, looking down at Amemiya as she slept on her bed of white lilies, and remembered her last words.

When Amemiya had called Kurosaki "father," she had thrust a blade into his heart, but hadn't she done it because she never wanted him to forget her?

If so, then at the very end of it all, Amemiya had attained her dream.

I was sure Kurosaki would never forget that word whispered to him with a smile.

Amemiya never could have competed with Kayano romantically, and that word —*father*—was the best revenge Amemiya could have gotten. It was a confession, a final stab that cost her life.

Amemiya deserved no pity: She was not a girl tossed cruelly about by fate.

She was a wild, strong girl who had changed her story through the force of her will.

She was a girl who had loved with the force of a storm.

That night in the chemistry lab, I had met a Catherine who pursued Heathcliff.

And I wondered if Heathcliff, left behind by two Catherines—Kayano Kujo and Hotaru Amemiya—would go on living in solitude, nursing the ravenous hunger in his heart.

When he attended the funeral, Kurosaki had been haggard and thin, his skin papery, and rough stubble had been growing on his face. Anguish, despair, and physical pain mingled in his flashing eyes. He looked like a criminal suffering from a torture that gave him not a moment's relief.

Would salvation ever reach him as well?

Maybe he didn't want it. Maybe he would wander the gusting storms of the moor to seek out the shades of the women he loved.

After the funeral, Maki gave Ryuto a letter that Amemiya had entrusted to her.

Ryuto ripped it open and read it on the spot. Partway through, his hands and shoulders shook minutely and his face twisted. Finally, through his tears, he ripped the letter into tiny pieces.

“I didn’t want her to tell me she was sorry or to thank me or anythin’. Hotaru—I wish you’d loved me. If we’d had more time, I would have taken you a bunch more places. I would have fed you all sorts of stuff and fattened you up.”

The torn-up letter fluttered through the ranks of crosses like white petals scattering in the breeze. Tears rolled down Ryuto’s cheeks.

I’m sorry that I hurt you, Ryu.

I’m grateful that you would be with me, even the way I am. You were the only one who liked “Hotaru,” Ryu.

That man—my father—my aunt—everyone saw my mother through me. Everyone loved me because I looked like her, not because of me. But you were looking at Hotaru all along, Ryu. You told me you loved me, and you called me by my name. Hotaru Amemiya.

You were my “Day Boy.” Maybe the last gift I received from God was being allowed to know you. If I could have lived with you in the world of light, I think I would have been as happy as the girl in that story.

But I couldn’t leave that room where there was only darkness. That was the only place I could live. I wanted to be there more than heaven, more than anywhere.

I really am sorry, Ryu. Thank you for everything.

A fine rain began to fall, landing on Ryuto’s bent head and shoulders.

Tohko held her lavender-colored umbrella over him.

In a trembling voice, he told us to go on without him, that he wanted to stay a little longer.

Tohko pressed the umbrella into Ryuto’s hand, a mournful look on her face.

Maki went home with Takamizawa in her car. She offered us a ride, but Tohko

said she wanted to walk home, so I said that I would, too.

Sharing my dark blue umbrella, we walked together down the road hemmed in by a gray sky.

The summer rain was quiet and warm.

Tohko wasn't crying, but she was less talkative than usual and her eyelashes cast shadows over her black eyes. Her sadness came through without her saying a word.

I talked about trivial things, listening to the sound of the rain hitting my umbrella in the background.

I talked about how my midterms had gone, that such and such had happened at my house, what books I'd read recently, CDs I liked… about Kotobuki…

"Nanase said she gets out of the hospital this week."

"Oh? That's good. You know, Kotobuki covered for me that day. It wasn't her fault that I shouted at everyone."

Tohko glanced at me. She smiled faintly without asking why I had been so upset.

"Really? Nanase is so nice."

Maybe she was.

Maybe I would try visiting her again before she was released. If I talked to her properly without expecting failure, maybe we could improve our relations.

Tohko turned her eyes ahead again and in a gentle voice told me, "You know, reading *Wuthering Heights* makes me hungry, but… I love that book. I think it ends happily. Before she died, Emily Brontë was supposed to be working on another book. I wonder what that mysterious second novel would have been like."

Her eyelashes drooped and she closed her eyes, as if imagining what it might taste like.

Miu Inoue had disappeared without ever publishing a second work.

I would never write another novel.

But if I were to write another, I wonder what it might taste like.

Her eyes still closed, Tohko whispered, “Write me another love story, Konoha.”

“Okay. One with a ghost in it?”

“No! Not that!”

She looked so funny as her eyes snapped open and she refused frantically.

“No ghosts, promise!” she emphasized, pouting. My face naturally relaxed and my heart warmed.

“Okay, okay. But if you do anything crazy, you’re getting a full course of ghosts,” I told her deliberately, making her that much more frantic and sulky. I savored this bite of modest everyday life.

I couldn’t go back to the past.

I didn’t know what sort of future I was heading toward.

But everyone lives an uncertain tale of injury and tears and occasional healing.

With sulking, laughing, frustration and grumpiness, making jibes and laughing again, we continued walking through the summer rain.

Afterword

Hello, Mizuki Nomura here. This is the second installment of the *Book Girl* series. It was a pretty tough delivery this time around, and I even went to my editor in tears to ask if I could change the story partway through. But I'm so, so glad that it all came together all right in the end. I've loved *Wuthering Heights*—the inspiration this time around—since I was little, and I wish I could have delved into Emily Brontë in the story a little more. She's chock-full of delectable episodes! Like the pretend world she had when she was a child or her relationship to her older sister Charlotte. The poetry collection the three sisters published together is steamy, too. I recommend both her biography and her poetry.

Thank you so much to the illustrator Miho Takeoka for her enchantingly beautiful drawings! When I saw the sketches, Hotaru and Ryuto were exactly the way I imagined them!

In the initial draft, Kurosaki was all-out creepy and felt more like gothic horror. He was really scary, but I changed his description so I asked if he could move in a less, uh… terrifying direction, and he got way more beautiful. But I'm glad there was a hint of the horror Kurosaki still! Seeing five or six of the horror Kurosakis all lined up with different hairstyles was quite a spectacle. It's too bad I can't share them with all of you.

I received many responses to the first story, *Book Girl and the Suicidal Mime*, and it was extremely encouraging. I also got to see the reader response cards. Some people put their own stamps on the cards, but you don't need to do that for Famitsu books! The page count went up in this book, so the price did, too. To all the students out there: I'm sorry! Thank you very much for buying this book! I still have a ton of assignments to get through, so until next time. See you!

Mizuki Nomura

July 24, 2006

ARTIST AFTERWORD

I’m very happy to see you once again. This is Volume 2. It is blue. I painted and I painted, but it stayed blue…

This sketch is of Kurosaki and Kayano by request of my manager (who was endlessly helpful again). Have a guide to the numbers while you’re at it.

I’ll see you again in the next book.

Miho Takeoka

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BOOK GIRL AND THE FAMISHED SPIRIT

MIZUKI NOMURA

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